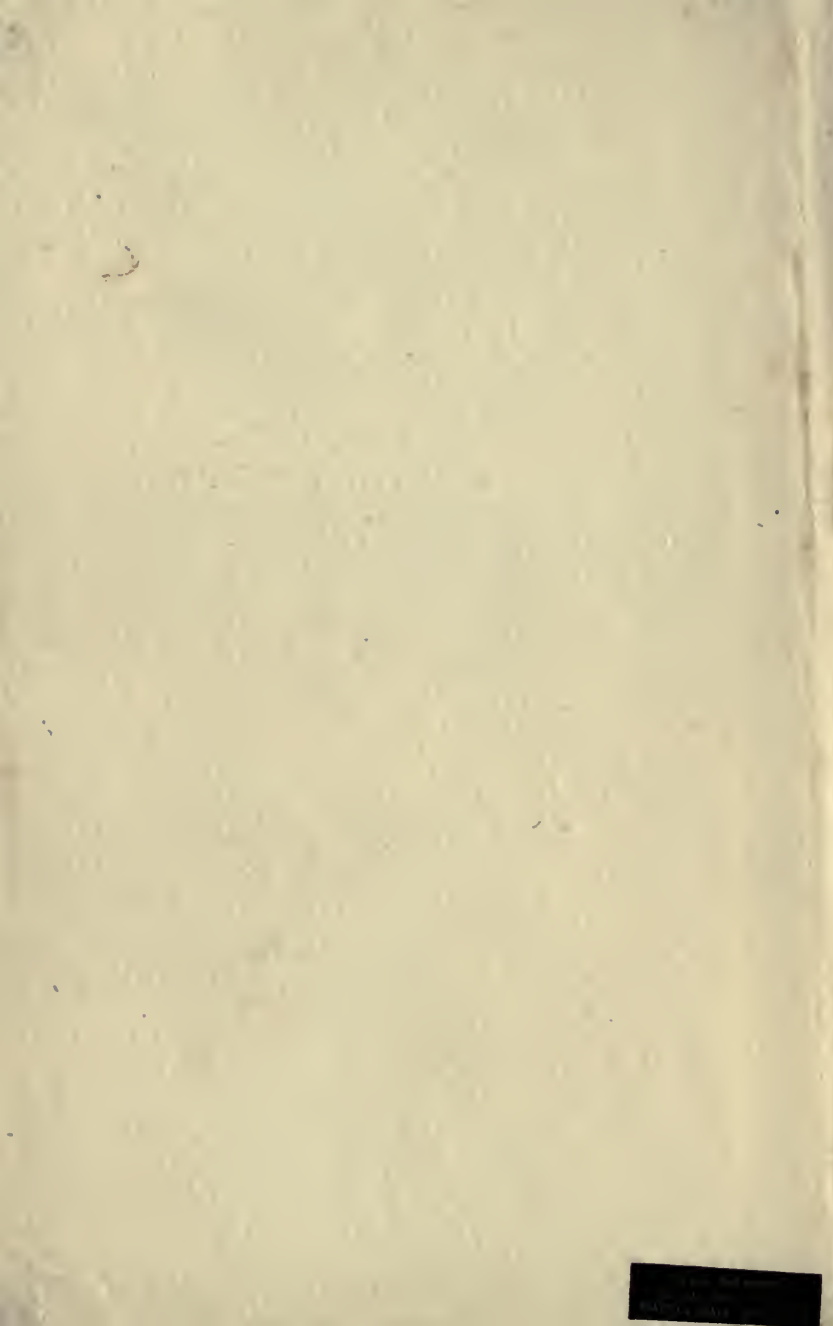


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# STRANGE ROADS

BY

MAUD DIVER

Author of "Captain Desmond, V.C.," "Desmond's Daughter,"  
"Judgment of the Sword," "Unconquered," etc.

"Launch out into the deep."

ST. LUKE, 5. 4.

"His spirit's meat

Was freedom ; and his staff was wrought

Of strength ; and his cloak woven of thought."

SWINBURNE.

LONDON

CONSTABLE AND COMPANY LTD.

*First Published 1918*

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To  
the Memory of my old Friend and Critic  
JOHN SCOTT STOKES

*In early years he was Secretary and Librarian to John Henry Newman; and from contact with that great Englishman he acquired his delicate sense of what is genuine in Literature, his rare knowledge of English letters, which was ever at the service of his intimate friends, among whom I was proud to be numbered. For many years a member of the Savage Club, it was there—through my father—that he came into personal touch with my early work. From that time forward, he was my most constant reader, my most devoted, yet candid, critic; and my debt to him, in every way, is far greater than this small tribute can adequately express.*

M. D.

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## PROLOGUE

### One Mere Day

#### CHAPTER I

“The cruellest lies are often told in silence.” R. L. S.

THE April sun shone full upon the easterly windows of Avonleigh Hall, transfiguring the stern, grizzled face of the house, where Blounts of Avonleigh had lived and died since the days of Cœur de Lion; caressing it with light and warmth, as a child caresses the face of an old man to make him smile and play at being young again.

And the house responded after its kind. Its rough stones looked a few shades less sombre than usual. Golden and wine coloured leaf-buds gleamed, half-open, on the thorny traceries of the Gloire de Dijon that framed the three tall windows of Lady Avonleigh's morning room. Under the low, broad ledge daffodils made stars and splashes of brightness; and the centuries-old lawn, across the gravel pathway, was gay with grape hyacinth and blue scilla. The breeze brought a whiff of fresh-cut grass and a

mowing machine purred steadily somewhere out of sight. The sun—that, for all his million years, alone possesses the secret of immortal youth—was luring the whole world to play at being young again on that radiant spring morning.

Suddenly there broke upon the stillness a patter of scurrying feet followed by the vision of a slim sturdy figure, in a brown jersey suit, that dashed out of the shrubbery and sped along the gravel path toward the house. Faster and faster it sped; shoulders squared, head flung back, hair flying, the small blunt-featured face set in resolute lines. At eight years old it is a very serious matter to be a smuggler, caught red-handed, fleeing for dear life from the clutches of Outraged Authority; and Derek was always terribly in earnest over the game of the moment.

He had a fair start of Authority in the person of a tall boy in flannel shirt and trousers, who came loping after him with long strides. This was young Evan Trevanyon Blount, heir of Avonleigh;—a lordly schoolboy, with a soul above childish games, and not given to being terribly in earnest over anything. He had revived the smuggler drama—an invention of old standing—because he had nothing better to do and because it mildly amused him to work Derek up over it and give the youngster a pommeling. Not that he had an ounce of the bully in his nature; but it had been rubbed into him at school that his own early sufferings were entirely for his good: and it occurred to him that Derek might



as well have a little benefit of that kind in advance. It enlivened the holidays and it didn't hurt the "kid."

His long legs were gaining steadily, now, on the short ones ahead of him; and Derek could feel his heart beating all over his body. As he came level with the morning-room windows a wild inspiration flashed through him. If he could touch wood it was "sanctuary." That was one of the unwritten laws of the game. With a sudden swerve to the right, and a flying leap, he landed on the broad window-sill—breathless, but safe.

There he stood in full sunlight, clutching the woodwork with one very square brown hand; his resolute lower lip thrust out; his eyes screwed up against the glare so that they almost vanished under the thick straight line of his brows—a sufficiently engaging picture of half-nervous defiance to soften any heart but that of a brother who was simply enjoying the joke.

"You can't touch me *now*, Van. Yah!—I'm sanctuary!" he cried as the older boy stood regarding him out of a pair of cool grey eyes.

"Can't I?" Van drawled, looking him up and down with the air of an ogre mentally scrunching the bones of his predestined prey. It was a horrid moment for Derek; but his faith in Van was absolute and he stood his ground.

"You know you can't—on your honour," he retorted with an out-thrust of his chin; and, confident in security, the tip of a tongue appeared between

his teeth. The joy it was, and the relief, even for a few moments, to be master of the situation. Yet, come what might in the way of retribution, he would rather be the smuggler than Outraged Authority any day.

"Well, as to that," Van answered suavely, "*you* can't stand hanging on to the window frame for ever; and when I do get at you I'll scalp you extra for your cheek. I'm in no hurry. I can wait!"

And seating himself on the grass, hands clasped round his knees, he proceeded to stare his small brother out of countenance.

As a mere game this was well enough and Derek could brazen it out with the best. But he was not playing a game. He was acting a thrilling drama. It was not Van who sat there staring at him. It was Authority, waiting to pounce on him, to inflict punishment, merciless and condign. He had been "scalped" once this morning, without the extra, and had no ambition to repeat the experience. The joy of mastery had been brief indeed. He could not have explained why, but he felt ensnared; held fast by those immovable eyes. Queer small sensations began to creep down his spine. Stubborn though he was by nature, and no coward, he began to wonder how much longer he could hold out.

A bold attempt to spring clear of Van and dash off again seemed his only chance of salvation. But though he had regained his breath a little, he frankly shirked the risk and the terror of it. Still—even if

things were hopeless he was not going to let himself be tamely caught ; he, Dirk of the Red Hand, the terror of the country-side ! As mere Derek Blount he had no business to be standing there with muddy boots on the window-sill of his mother's morning room. If she or any one else came in, an undignified scolding would be his portion. He hovered, in very truth, between the devil and the deep sea.

The only alternative to a daring outward leap was sudden and swift retreat through the room behind and up the wide staircase to the schoolroom ; for, according to the old rule of the game, if he could reach the schoolroom unscathed he was entitled to free pardon. Both the morning room and the staircase were forbidden ground and the mud of the shrubbery was on his boots. But the element of risk made retreat seem less ignominious ; and the small person on the window-ledge had a good deal of pride in him, though he had not yet learnt to call it by that name.

Almost before Van was aware of it, he had taken a backward leap and was making for the door, fortified by a desperate resolve to lock it behind him.

Van, a punctilious person, lost a few seconds by hurriedly wiping his shoes on the grass. But he could be swift footed when he chose and the Kid's unexpected move had revived the excitement of pursuit.

Half way across the room he pounced on Derek and pinioned him in a grasp that was firmly unyielding.

"Now then, young 'un, you may as well throw up the sponge," he said with his slight drawl. "Give in with a good grace and it'll be the better for you."

"Shan't!" Derek flashed out furiously, and fought like a wild thing so far as his imprisoned elbows would allow.

He was hopelessly at a disadvantage, but pride and temper were now thoroughly aroused. He cared nothing for the result. He would die fighting. Foot by foot Van dragged his struggling victim back towards the window.

"Give over, you little fool, and come out of this. We've no business in here, you know," he said at last, by way of bringing the boy to his senses.

There was no answer. For a moment Derek ceased to struggle; and Van—who disliked all undue exertion—slightly relaxed his grip.

It was enough. With a fierce unexpected twist, Derek freed himself and fled behind a table on which stood a tall Satzuma vase.

"Pax—I'm safe!" he panted, clutching "wood" with both hands.

But this time Van was angry—a rare event.

"You deliberately hoaxed me, you little devil. Nothing'll save you now."

With due caution he slipped a long arm half round the table. Derek jerked himself away, still clinging to it, and giving it so sharp a tilt that the vase fell crashing to the ground.

Disaster brought them to their senses. The game

was forgotten in face of a reality that filled them both with dismay.

Derek stood motionless gazing at the murdered treasure. Tears pricked his eyeballs. Apart from fear of consequences, he felt—as always—a queer pang at sight of any newly-broken object. He was also thinking ruefully that “things” always went against him. If it was possible to get himself into trouble he never missed the chance. But this was a terribly serious business; only the knowledge that Van shared the responsibility gave him any hope that justice might be tempered with mercy.

Dimly, through the confusion in his brain, he heard his brother remark with quiet emphasis: “Well—you’ve jolly well done for yourself *this* time”; saw him retreat towards the window; wondered, with a mental shiver, must they “go and tell.” . . .

Then the door of the room opened and their mother stood before them, very tall and slender in a grey gown with a flounce that trailed upon the ground lending her added height and dignity. One saw at a glance whence Van derived his natural grace, his good looks and his cool grey eyes.

“Boys! What’s the meaning of this?” she exclaimed, looking from one to the other—Van, placid and detached, half seated on the window-sill; Derek with flushed cheeks and bright eyes, obviously guilty, standing by the slaughtered vase.

The sharp note of reproach in her voice struck at his heart. In a swift impulse of remorse he ran to

her, unmindful of muddy boots upon her trailing gown—they trailed copiously that year—and, being Derek, he promptly stumbled on a hidden foot.

Before a contrite word could be spoken, he found himself being scolded for clumsiness, his besetting fault. The words he had meant to speak fled from his brain. The injured toe and muddied flounce aggravated Lady Avonleigh's vexation at his original offence; and there were tell-tale marks on the carpet.

"Really, Derek, I don't know what to *do* with you," she concluded with a sigh of weary impatience. "You don't even try to improve. Direct disobedience to orders and my valuable vase smashed——"

"C-can't it be mended?" the boy stammered, gulping down his tears.

"It doesn't look much like it," his mother answered unmoved. "And it wouldn't be the same thing if it could. Besides—you've no business to be in here at all. You know that perfectly well."

"I—er—I didn't really *mean* to come in here," Derek plunged—in a desperate attempt at self-defence. "It was a game . . . and Van—I——"

He broke off, too loyal to implicate his brother, taking it for granted that Van would help him out and shoulder his share of the disaster.

Van, however, still sat there in the window swinging one leg, looking distressed and sympathetic but entirely aloof. And in response to Derek's appealing glance he said never a word. Nor did his mother

dream of questioning him. In her eyes Van was sacrosanct. He could not possibly have any connexion with breakages and mud-marks on the carpet. Things of that kind were Derek's specialities; and they kept Lady Avonleigh in a chronic, half-despairing state of annoyance with her younger boy, who seemed to have nothing of herself in his composition.

Van's silence fell on Derek's heart like a stone. It took him several seconds to grasp all it implied; and while he floundered in stormy depths of bewilderment and protest, his mother stood awaiting further explanation, looking down upon her small son with curiously little of sympathy or understanding in her heart. It is to be feared that, just then, the broken vase affected her more than the child's very evident confusion and remorse.

"Well, Derek?" she said at last.

"I—I can't prop'ly explain. I'm sorry," he muttered without looking up: and it is just possible that Van felt faintly remorseful when he perceived that Derek—though a mere kid—knew very well how to play the game. But the meshes of his own silence entangled him. He could not, now, free himself without risk of falling in his mother's esteem; a risk he was not prepared to take for the pluckiest kid in creation.

And Derek's pluck was undeniable. Outwardly stoical, inwardly raging, he accepted the rest of his scolding and his sentence of punishment in a silence that simply appeared sullen and tended to aggravate his sin. It was hard on Derek, who never sulked,

that his face, in moments of intense gravity, had a distinctly sulky look.

He would be in disgrace for the rest of the day, his mother told him in her low even voice, which, to Derek, always sounded beautiful, even when pronouncing judgment. He would not come down to the dining room for lunch. He was to stay alone in the schoolroom all the afternoon ; have tea there by himself and go to bed at six. He would not be locked in. He was simply put on his honour. At least Lady Avonleigh did not make the mistake of distrusting this troublesome rebel of her own creating.

“ But of course,” she concluded sternly, “ no mere punishment can make up for the loss of my beautiful vase—a piece of rare old Japanese china——”

This was too much for Derek’s feelings. “ You can take *all* the three-pennies out of my money-box, there’s quite a lot there now,” he murmured in a desperate rush that failed to hide the quiver in his voice.

That unconscious and pathetic touch of humour might well have disarmed a sterner monitor ; but Lady Avonleigh—unhappily for herself and others—was almost impervious to humour. She merely saw, in Derek’s offer, the first real sign of remorse ; and her voice was a shade gentler as she said with becoming gravity : “ My dear child, I wouldn’t dream of such a thing. Besides, it would be useless, and I think you are being sufficiently punished as it is. Now go upstairs, and if you want me to believe you



are sorry, try—for once—to do exactly what you are told.”

That “for once” hurt Derek like the flick of a whip. With one more glance in Van’s direction, he went out of the room—no longer Dirk the Red-Handed, but just a discomfited small boy, smarting under the sting of injustice and his brother’s utterly unexpected desertion.

## CHAPTER II

“She who slays, is she who bears—who bears.”

ALICE MEYNELL.

**A**LONE up in the schoolroom, he shut the door upon himself with a sort of tragic deliberation, and scrambled on to the low polished oak cupboard that ran round the bay window, forming a wide seat. There, huddled together, knees drawn up to his chin, he bowed his forehead on them and cried, hot passionate tears that seemed as if they would never come to an end: tears for the broken vase, for his mother's distress, for the discovery that Van, his hero, could be cowardly and mean like any ordinary mortal: and not least for his own persistent ill-luck and the severe punishment meted out to him for an accidental sin.

To do Lady Avonleigh justice, she had too little imagination to realize how harsh was her sentence of imprisonment for a creature of eight years old, on a day of April sun and wind. But for Derek, the real tragedy of that eventful morning was Van's behaviour. By flagrant disregard of the unwritten law, he had been indirectly responsible for the disaster; and, in the face of that—to let another bear

all the blame. . . . Loyal little soul that he was, Derek would never have believed it possible. He could scarcely believe it now, except for the fact that his own sensations at the moment were too painfully vivid to be forgotten—or readily forgiven.

Nor was he alone in this exalted view of his elder brother. Faith in young Evan Blount was part of the Avonleigh creed. The entire household revolved round him, as planets round the sun. True, there were heretics among them; notably Malcolm—Viscount Avonleigh's land agent—and Mrs. Consbigh, the housekeeper; but, being wise in their generation, they revolved with the rest and kept their heresy to themselves.

Mrs. Consbigh, it is true, made no secret of her devotion to Master Derek.

"Goin' to be a man, *he* is," she would remark with significant emphasis, when goaded into championship by some over-coloured laudation of Van. "His mother hadn't much hand in the making of him. He's the living image of the old Viscountess, who can't abide my Lady. Seems as if he's to be paying for that—poor lamb!"

The last was her own private reflection; for she was a retainer of the old order, loyal to every member of the great house she had served for twenty years. If, in Derek's case, loyalty was tinged with a deeper feeling, that was her own affair: and she accepted—as part of the boy's inherent masculinity—the fact that her motherly kindness evoked curiously little response.

It did not occur to her that the surreptitious affection she lavished on him emphasized all that was lacking in his mother's rare and coveted caresses. Naturally it did not occur to Derek either. He felt it simply—with a child's vague, unerring instinct for matters of the heart—as one of the many bewildering things in life that somehow hurt you and you couldn't tell why. There were moods, as he grew older, when he almost hated the good woman who gave him, out of her large hearted abundance, that which he craved from his mother and from no one else on earth.

And to-day, as the first passion of grief subsided into long, shivering sobs, the fear crept in that, when she heard of his disgrace, she would seek him out and try to comfort him. But in the main his thoughts circled round Van, his shattered idol, who would never again be perfect in his eyes. Probably, if he cared enough, Van would manage to patch things up in his persuasive fashion : but dimly Derek knew that within himself something had been broken that morning quite as precious as his mother's vase and as impossible to mend. . . .

A turn of the door handle brought back the dread of Mrs. Consbigh. Hoping she would think he was asleep, he did not stir or lift his head. Then with a shock—half amazement, half anger—he realized that it was Van. Still he did not move. What right had Van, after basely deserting him, to come and gloat over his misery ? He wished now that he had locked himself in.

Van paid no heed to his silent rebuff, but came straight to the window-seat ; and the next moment Derek felt his thick shock of hair being lightly touselled and rubbed " every which way " by Van's long fingers. Derek set his teeth and remained motionless. He did not understand that Van, by coming to him, was implicitly confessing himself in the wrong.

" I'm scalping you ! I told you I would ! " he said at last in his gentlest voice, so like his mother's that it went straight to Derek's heart. But, in his childish fashion, he was inflexible. His emotions did not easily flare up or readily subside. Van—being pre-eminently flexible—had come too soon.

" Oh—*go* away ! " was all the response he received in a voice of muffled misery, and Derek jerked his head ungraciously from under those caressing fingers that could neither reach nor heal his hidden wound.

Van drew himself up. " Thanks," he said coolly. " I think it was jolly decent of me to come. But you're the most obstinate little beggar in creation. If you weren't, all this would never have happened. You *deserved* it—for hoaxing me. I just did it to punish you."

That had been Van's excuse to himself for a slip out of the straight path that had, in point of fact, been simply instinctive : and it was significant of the vital difference between the brothers, that the elder could not, or would not see—what the younger vaguely felt—that any reference to his own deserts was altogether wide of the mark.

"Oh, Van"—he flung up his head in sheer desperation, and pushed back the dark hair from his forehead—"that's not fair—you can't—just because of me. If I'm obst'nate, you can hammer me. But you can't . . . break rules and . . . sort of . . . half tell lies . . ."

It was a life-long drawback for Derek that he could never call a spade an agricultural implement : and at that ill-judged word Van drew himself up sharply, a queer glint in his eyes.

"Confound your cheek !" he said ; he was rather proud of the new swear. "D'you think I came here to be lectured by a chit of an infant like you ? I just came to cheer you up because you got rather more than you bargained for ; but I shan't trouble to come again, and I wish you joy of your own company for the whole afternoon." But as he turned to go a thought struck him. "You don't go blabbing about this, mind—to old Con or Ina."

Ina was the sister who came between them.

"'Course not," Derek retorted with scornful emphasis. "I wouldn't tell any one—never !"

The patent sincerity of that asseveration softened the flexible Van. "You're a game little beggar, Derek," he said with his drawl. Then after a thoughtful investigation of his pockets. "Have some choc. Give you something to do."

He proffered a whole stick of Suchard. Such unwonted generosity might have savoured of bribery, but for Derek's proud confidence that Van did not doubt his word. Probably the elder boy himself

hardly realized that his impulse, like his visit, was prompted by an uneasy conscience.

In any case, a stick of Suchard was irresistible. It could comfort if it could not heal. Derek held out his hand. "Thank you, Van," he said gravely.

Van deposited his peace offering, and for a moment his fingers closed over Derek's open palm.

"You're too much in earnest over things, little 'un," he said lightly. "You must get the better of that or you'll have a rotten time at school."

And Derek was left alone to digest, at leisure, that sagacious piece of advice.

The upper housemaid, who had removed the fragments from the morning room, brought him his dinner. Her attempt to convey mute sympathy was baulked by Derek, who looked steadily out of the window till he heard the door close behind her.

Mrs. Consbigh appeared later with an offering of dried figs, and was not to be evaded by such simple means. Besides—Derek had a pronounced weakness for dried figs, as the good soul very well knew. She was a spacious, deep-breasted woman, with a frame as large as her heart and a rather gruff voice that was a sore trial to her because it "went against" her with children; a natural-born mother of men, which could not be said of her mistress.

"In trouble again, are you, my lamb?" she greeted him, essaying a sympathetic note that only made her voice sound huskier than ever. "Well, well, we're all mortal, and accidents *do* happen to

the best of us. You take it like a man an' the worst'll soon be over."

Derek nodded—quite unconvinced. For him the five hours that loomed between dinner and bedtime seemed an eternity. But if Mrs. Consbigh's philosophy was unconvincing, her figs were a very present help in trouble. Derek privately resolved to eke them out as long as possible by taking small bites and counting his "chews" like a certain famous old gentleman whose name he had forgotten.

"I oughtn't to have them, you know," he murmured with his mouth full. "Because—it was very bad. It can't be mended, Mother said."

Mrs. Consbigh sighed. "Ah, that's a pity. Still—there's lots of things broken in this world, without intention, that can't be mended; more vallible, too, than a vawse. You'll learn that, my pretty, one o' these days."

This time Derek's nod was charged with conviction and a touch of tragic self-importance; but he consoled himself with another bite of his fig.

Mrs. Consbigh lingered, reluctant to leave him. She strolled towards the window and stood looking out. Derek watched her uneasily. She ought not to be there. Solitary confinement was his sentence, and he was to try and do, "for once," exactly what he had been told. Also she was interfering with the plan to count his "chews."

"How long have you to stay here?" she asked suddenly, and Derek's face clouded. He resented the painful question.



"Till six o'clock. And then—I'm to go to bed."

Mrs. Consbigh stifled something that sounded like "Horrid shame!" Aloud, she said again—"It'll soon be over. Have you got a nice tale to read?"

"I've got my Hans Andersen." A pause. Derek grew still more uneasy: and at last he spoke.

"Please, Mrs. Con . . . I'm afraid you mustn't be here. Mother would be vexed. I've got to stay quite alone and . . . do what I'm told."

That was too much for Mrs. Consbigh. She turned and swept towards him.

"Oh, *bless* your little heart!" And to his unspeakable amazement—faintly tinged with wrath—she flung her arms round him and kissed the top of his head.

"*You* shan't get into any further trouble through your old Con. But I'll bring you something for tea," she assured him, as she went out.

With the help of the figs and the chocolate and Hans Andersen the interminable afternoon dragged itself to an end. The garden below him was full of sunshine and song; but the world seemed utterly empty of people. Van, having salved his conscience with a gift, had gone out riding with his father; and not even an under gardener came within Derek's range of vision. He tried to fancy he was Dirk the Red Handed, in gaol, looking out for his accomplice to help him to escape. But the game had quite lost its hold on him. He felt he would never want to play it again. . . .

At tea-time Mrs. Consbigh reappeared with two

sugared cakes. But on this occasion she did not linger : nor did she outrage his dignity by further caresses.

Punctually at six, the young governess who taught him and Ina came and fetched him to bed. When that melancholy rite was over, she shut out the friendly daylight with blinds and curtains and left him with the pious hope that he would be a " better boy to-morrow."

She was not sympathetic. He disliked and defied her ; and she had endured a good deal at his hands. He was very thankful to be rid of her ; in spite of the fact that being left alone in the dark, horribly wide-awake, was the worst part of his punishment.

Who—except a dog—could be expected to go to sleep at six o'clock ?

In the hope of inducing weariness, he screwed up his eyes tight ; because the sooner sleep came, the sooner it would be to-morrow. But after five minutes of vigorous screwing he only felt more wide awake than before. Evidently sleep could not be wooed ; it must be waited for. And as he lay there waiting, a faint hope crept into his heart that perhaps his mother might come up to tell him he was forgiven, and then he could say properly how sorry he had been all along. It would be easier in the dark if she was holding his hand. And supposing she did come . . . and found him asleep—!

The fear of that calamity banished all attempts to coax weariness. He lay strained and tense, his eyes wide open, his ears alert to catch the first

sound of her footsteps : while she, downstairs, sat in her favourite arm-chair, by the freshly-lighted fire, reading a novel.

She had been writing letters till after six ; and in signing the last but one, a vague idea of going up to see Derek had crossed her mind. She was not one of those mothers who make a regular rule of the good-night function, either from duty or from a natural impulse of love. Only with her first-born it had been a matter of course ; and when he grew too old for it, she became careless ; simply followed the mood.

To-night, for obvious reasons, Derek had intruded once or twice upon her thoughts. After all, he had been punished severely and had taken it well. Hence the impulse to go up and see him. But that last letter had driven it from her mind, and the sight of her novel lying open at a critical point in the tale, had completed her oblivion of the troublesome small son, who was so curiously like his Scottish grandmother that at times he scarcely seemed her own.

Half an hour later, in a pause at the end of a chapter, she suddenly remembered him again. Perhaps the intensity of his longing found its way, by some mysterious process, into her brain.

She glanced at the clock and suffered a passing twinge of self-reproach. "Too late now," she decided, half sorry, half relieved ; for she was very comfortable and not strong and she hated stairs. He probably had not expected her, and by now he would be fast asleep. Not for a moment did she

suppose that the morning's disaster had made any deep impression on him. He was not sensitive like her dear Van——

And she went on reading till it was time to dress for dinner.

Derek—still lying tense and alert—heard the tap-tap of her heels when she reached the polished first-floor landing and his heart thumped jerkily in expectation. But the sound retreated—then ceased abruptly, and he knew he was either forgotten or not forgiven——

A feeling of utter loneliness swept through him. He longed to spring out of bed and run down to her room and pour out all that was in his heart. But she was so much a goddess, so little a mother to him, that he did not dare. Instead he found sobs coming thick and fast. Too proud to let them be heard, he burrowed under the bedclothes, stuffed the sheet into his mouth, and, when passion had subsided, quietly cried himself to sleep.

## BOOK I

### Beyond the Skyline

#### CHAPTER I

“ Deep in the man sits fast his fate,  
To mould his fortunes, mean or great :  
Or say, the foresight that awaits  
Is the same genius that creates.”—EMERSON.

**I**T was a mild blustering afternoon of September ; the face of the sky moody and variable like the face of a spoilt child. Clouds scudded across the blue, and a sharp squall of rain dashed petulantly against the windows of the Southampton express. Before the burst of temper was well over, the sun, flashing through a rift, changed the last of the raindrops into a shower of jewels ; and away across the heather there sprang a rainbow.

The shimmering arc of colour, bright against lowering clouds, lost itself in the heart of a pinewood that gloomed darkly between moor and sky. The whole spacious landscape throbbled with light, life and colour. Nature, in her most enchanting mood, seemed challenging that trainload of human restless-

ness to be unaware of her surpassing beauty. But for the most part, their eyes were holden from habit or glued to the printed page.

Happily there are always exceptions. One of them, on this occasion, was a young man who occupied a corner seat, in a second-class carriage, on the side of the rainbow. His appearance proclaimed him a genuine devotee of the road. The grey-green Norfolk coat, though of good parentage, was shabby to a degree. The pockets bulged, the elbows were rubbed and a leather button was missing. Worse still, its air of well-bred vagabondage clashed outrageously with a pair of new grey flannels very vilely cut, nor was there even a waistcoat to modify the effect. Of these distressful details the wearer seemed serenely oblivious; and that trifling fact bespoke breeding as plainly as the repose of his square sunburnt hands bespoke strength. His face, that was noticeable, without any claim to good looks, matched the hands, sunburn and all. There was latent power in the modelling of the broad brow and dark, uncovered head; in the blunt nose and slightly aggressive lower lip. But it was the eyes—clear and direct under eave-like brows—that held the attention even of casual observers; so that those who looked once were apt to turn and look again.

For the face of that ill-dressed young Englishman was still, in essence, the face of the boy who had stood in the morning-room window, some fourteen years ago, defying Outraged Authority to the knife. In detail, certain lines of character had been empha-

sized and the soft contours of childhood chiselled away. His eyebrows made a thicker smudge across his forehead. His nose was more definitely square at the tip ; the dent between mouth and chin was sharper, the jaw more clearly defined. The face still looked a little sullen in repose ; still lit up astonishingly when he smiled : and he was altogether the old Derek—or rather the young—in his attitude towards those accidental flannels which, until they could be remedied, could at least be ignored. What his fellow travellers might be thinking about his clothes or himself concerned him not at all.

For the most part he devoted his attention to the window and sat perfectly still, absorbed in the passing scene. The fact that he had just returned from a nine weeks' pilgrimage on the Continent made him more alive than usual to the beauties of his own land on this day of peculiarly English mutability. From the moment suburbs loosened their stranglehold on the country, and disfigured Surrey shook herself free from encroaching hordes, he had discarded *Punch* in favour of pinewoods, orange-tawny gravel pits and amethystine sweeps of ling in full bloom. Later, came emerald sweeps of meadowland ; hawthorn hedges bright with ripening berries ; a farm or two, a townlet and a golf course. Then more heath and pinewoods, as the express dashed through the wild waste region round Aldershot, the scene of countless mimic battles, bloodless victories, and invasions repelled——

For Derek—fresh from the stark grandeur of the

Dolomites and the oleographic brilliance of Switzerland in summer—the charm of the whole misty shifting landscape was summed up in one word—England. What a mellow, friendly land it was! No harsh lines, no sharpness of contrast, even where moor and meadow kissed each other. A lazy, slow-moving, comfort-loving land? Yes—on the surface. Derek frankly admitted the common cry of England's detractors. He was, by nature, critical and clear-sighted, even where he loved. And remembering the well-tilled fields of France, he added, on his own account—an unproductive land: tragically so, for the country-side, that is the true England; dangerously so, perhaps——?

And where lay the blame? Derek, with the enviable assurance of youth, had his answer ready to hand—Free Trade and the Industrial Vote. As the younger son of a peer, whose belief in the land was no barren faith apart from works, he had been reared in close touch with its deliberately neglected problems. Talk at Avonleigh often turned upon the subject; and Derek was a born listener. Things heard left a deep impression on his eager brain: and now, while it travelled along these familiar lines, his attention was, for the first time, seriously arrested by the Industrial Vote incarnate that flaunted its bank account, so to speak, under his challenging gaze.

Directly opposite him sat a stout woman, expensively upholstered, clutching a restless Pekinese and quieting the creature, at intervals, with macaroons.



A purple "lancer" feather careened high above her hat, and her plump feet were mercilessly compressed into smart patent leather shoes. Beyond her more frankly expansive husband, sat two young men of much the same genus : one lean and pasty, the other fleshy and pasty. Both were fitfully studying the columns of a leading Radical journal. It did not need any particular gift for observation to detect the stamp of the counter on their neat persons, featureless features and disjointed chaff with a couple of girls opposite, who were sharing a box of chocolates and the doubtful wit of "Society Chatter."

To Derek, with the country-side on his brain, that chance handful of town products strikingly presented the other side of the shield. These, and hundreds like them, were the gifts of Industrialism to England. That they and their kind might increase and multiply, the town was sitting every year more heavily on the country's chest. . . .

At this point he checked a certain tendency to lapse into the leading article vein ; the dire result of being very young and very much in earnest : and it was then that he discovered the girl in the far corner, next to the fleshy and pasty young man.

There was nothing very conspicuous about her, except her conspicuous unlikeness to the others. Her gloved hands were folded on a book she had not troubled to open ; and as she looked persistently out of the window he had little more than a profile view of her face. Not exactly pretty, was his first thought ; but emboldened by her absorption, he looked again.

She had moved a little now. Her eyes were lifted watching a mass of luminous cloud—a riot of high lights and ink-grey shadow—that sailed lordly in the blue. His impulse to look again had no connection with such obvious items as a small straight nose, forehead and brows tenderly curved, or the touch of childlike wonder that lightened her serious eyes. It was something about her whole aspect; something clear and swift and confident without a shadow of complacency. Contrasted with the three full-blown specimens of middle-class womanhood, she seemed a creature of another sphere. She wore everything, to her very gloves, with a difference; and the colour in her cheeks was not the wild-rose bloom of England, but the deeper carmine of the south.

“No industrial bankbook there!” thought Derek; and a moment later he was jerked violently forward, almost into the stout lady’s arms. The train had stopped with a jar that quivered through all its amazed and startled occupants. The next station was still miles away. Every one sprang up. The young men emitted pious interjections; the stout lady, clutching her treasure, rushed panic-stricken to the farther window; hers being blocked by Derek’s head and shoulders.

All along the line a score or so of other heads were shot out: but their owners discovered nothing beyond a few mildly astonished cows and an agitated guard, doing his official best to temper agitation with dignity.

"I say, guard, what's the row?" Derek demanded when the man came within earshot.

"Some one's pulled the alarm chain, sir," was all the answer he got, as the badged and belted one hurried past anticipating murder or outrage at the very least.

"Alarm chain," Derek informed his fellow passengers over his shoulder.

As he spoke, his attention was attracted by a bare-headed sailor, three windows down, very young and very pink with repressed excitement.

"Please, sir, 'twas me," the boy called out eagerly to the approaching guard.

"Well—*where's* the bloke? Out with him. Look sharp! She's five minutes over time——"

"Please, sir—there ain't no bloke." The boy's voice was a shade less confident. "It's the wind that done it. I were just a takin' a squint at the old country and it snatched me cap clean off, it did. A brand *new* cap it was, sir," he added feelingly, as the guard's expression awakened a dim sense of the enormity he had committed—and anti-climax was complete.

Shouts of laughter rippled along the train. But to the guard it was no matter for mirth that the sacred Southampton express should be held up by an infantile blue-jacket who had lost his cap. In scathing terms he explained to that preposterous infant that the London and South Western Company did not stop their trains for his private convenience. "And maybe you 'aven't 'appened to notice," he

concluded with fatherly concern, "that there's a trifle of five pounds penalty for this sort of practical joke. Who's yer 'atter?"

The boy's colour ebbed and his jaw fell. He had noticed nothing, in that moment of distraction, except the providential chain. He was home on first leave since joining his ship, he explained with woefully diminished confidence. And no self-respecting sailor could knock around the town bareheaded. And the cap was brand new. And he hadn't stopped to think.

"Well, if you stop to jaw now, sonny, you'll lose the lot," the man interposed in a kindlier tone. "Nip out and back like a lightning streak, or you'll have to leg it——"

But the infant was already legging it for dear life, cheered as he went by sympathetic third-class passengers.

In the twinkling of an eye he was back again, the costly cap jammed down to his eyebrows; and what breath remained in his body was completely taken away by the discovery that a miraculous, shabby-looking "gent" had dropped from heaven, placated the guard and relieved him of that staggering fine into the bargain.

His mumbled attempt at thanks was nipped in the bud by a gruff, "All right, old chap. Don't fuss," from the boy of another world who was only a few years his senior.

For a second the two stood looking at each other. Then, "*I'd* know ye again, sir, anywhere . . . if we

should 'appen to meet," the sailor stammered awkwardly.

Derek smiled and nodded; and before the boy sprang on to the step he flung a daring question at the guard.

"Please, sir, 'oo is he, sir?"

"He's the Hon'able Derek Blount, son o' Lord Avonleigh of these parts. You're in luck, young stiver. Nip up. She's *ten* minutes over time now, thanks to you."

Derek, meanwhile, had seen the magic word "smoking" on the window next his own. He decided to enjoy a pipe and rescue his belongings at Elverstone: but as he grasped the door handle, he found himself hailed from his own carriage by a clear feminine voice.

"Oh, Mr. Blount, you're the very person I want to see! Do please come back."

That amazing invitation came from the girl who was different. He had seen her leaning out while he settled matters with the guard. "What the dickens——?" But there was no time for surprise or argument. The guard had raised his flag and swung himself on to the train. It started with a jerk just as Derek transferred his grasp to the next handle, pushed the door open and sprang in—mystified exceedingly and not a little vexed at being deprived of his pipe.

He found her sitting opposite him, a little flushed, her eyes alight.

"I must apologize," she said, speaking rather

rapidly without a trace of shyness. "But I heard your name. I'm Jack's step-sister—so you'll understand."

His mystification evaporated. Jack Burlton had been the companion of his trip.

"Oh, then you are Gabrielle—Miss De Vigne?" he said puzzled and a little awkwardly.

"Yes—I'm Gabrielle," she answered smiling: and fresh perplexity assailed him.

"But why are you here? I thought he was meeting you in town."

"So did he, poor dear! It's very distracting, but it couldn't be helped. You changed your dates, you see, and my French Canadian cousins in Brittany wired that I must join them sooner——"

"I say—you're not actually . . . off, now—to Canada?" Derek broke in. Concern for Jack put shyness to flight.

"Practically off."

"And Jack's clean missed you? I'm awfully sorry. I'm afraid it's partly my fault——"

"I'm afraid it is!" she agreed sweetly. "But please don't distress yourself. He'll get across before I sail. I've left a letter with instructions."

Her smiling friendliness and her intimate connexion with Jack made him almost forget she was a stranger and a charming girl to boot. He usually admired the last from a very respectful distance: the more charming, the more respectful the distance. But this one was already known to him as "Gay," the daughter of Jack's dead mother by her first husband.

Jack, who had no sisters, was devoted to her; and Derek's twinge of self-reproach, on his friend's account, helped him to forgive her for depriving him of a smoke. If he did not answer her last remark it was only because the counter-jumpers and "Society Chatter" young women embarrassed him by staring frankly and giggling over some joke that might or might not be connected with Miss de Vigne's unorthodox behaviour. He confounded their impertinence. Why on earth couldn't a girl obey a natural impulse without becoming a butt for their third-rate humour? Rather than cater for their amusement he sat silent, gazing abstractedly out at scurrying trees and fields, recalling the keen-edged joy of life reduced to its simplest elements. . . .

Very soon they all became bored and returned to their papers. The young woman next to him shut her eyes and seemed to fall asleep; and Derek was just beginning to hanker for his pipe when the girl's head lolled sideways, lower and lower. He glanced at it apprehensively and edged nearer the window. Miss de Vigne's eyes caught him in the act and they smiled.

"It is odd," she remarked, "our meeting like this, when Jack's plans have never come off."

"My fault again!" he admitted frankly. "I've always funk'd Commem. Not my line."

"You don't know what you've missed."

"Just as well, perhaps. The girls didn't miss much anyway."

He evidently meant it, and she politely forbore to

smile. There was a moment of silence ; then, with a tentative note in her voice, she asked : " Did you merely tramp the country ? Or did you try and get at the peasants—the people, out there ? "

" Oh, we tried—after a fashion—in Public School German ! But we weren't fooling round on a ' better understanding ' mission, if that's what you mean ? "

" You sound rather scornful. Have you no faith in them ? " she asked, an anxious crease between her brows.

Derek shook his head. " Not a shred of faith. I don't say we're not sincere, or the French either. But the sincerity is as one-sided as the sort of bargains that spring from it. Look at the Baghdad line——" Suddenly he became aware of her distress. " Have you been reared to think otherwise ? " he asked in a changed voice.

" To *hope* otherwise," she answered, her colour rising a little. " You see—Jack's father has a lot of German friends and business connections," she went on, turning her face away from inquisitive eyes. " He thinks very highly of some ; too highly, I'm afraid. In fact, that's the chief thing I wanted to see Jack about, and—why I spoke to you. All this summer, the Schonbergs, especially, have been getting more and more friendly, and—it bothers me. All that's most French in me distrusts that man by instinct. Dad—Mr. Burlton—says it's simply prejudice. He may be right ; but still——" She was silent a moment, gazing out over the wide sweep



of open country, her small even teeth compressing her lip. Then with a quick turn of her head she looked round again and said lightly: "I don't know why I'm boring you like this!"

Derek wrinkled his brows. "Does it worry Jack too?"

"Badly."

"Odd he's never mentioned it. Shall I say anything to him?"

"Yes—do. It'll ease his mind, now he hasn't got me to ease it on!"

Slackening speed warned him they were approaching Elverston. "I get out here," he said, rising as the train slowed down. He pulled his modest luggage out of the rack, hesitated a moment, then held out his hand. "Good-bye—good luck! It's a great country. And—if I can help in any way——?"

She sighed. "I don't think any one can—or I wouldn't be leaving England."

Then he sprang on to the platform and stood there a few seconds looking absently after the vanishing train. A quite unexpected adventure that; not at all in his line.

"Car's a bit late, sir," remarked a friendly porter who had known Derek from a boy.

"No car for me, James," he said. "They don't know I'm coming."

"Pleasant surprise, sir, I'm sure," purred the kindly old man. "Get you a fly, sir, from the 'Good Intent'?"

"No, thanks. I'd rather walk. You can freeze

on to my rücsack and the bag. Send 'em along by the carrier to-morrow."

He dived into his trouser pocket and brought out a shilling. "All the cash I've got left!" he said; "you're welcome to it," and passed out through the wooden gate into the familiar road that ran, white and smooth, over High Down, through Haddon Wood and Coombe St. Mary's, to Avonleigh Hall. Journeys and adventures were over. He was at home.

## CHAPTER II

“Between the born adventurer and the community man—there is a great gulf fixed.”—TENNYSON JESSE.

**B**Y this time, the sun definitely had the best of it. A brisk south wind was dispersing the last stragglers of the storm, splashing the uplands of High Down with flying shadows ; and away on the crest of the ridge, a coppice of larch and birch tossed plume-like boughs against the sky. On the left, as it were in the shallow dip of a wave, red roofs and hayricks, barns and nibbling sheep basked in the mellow afternoon light. Derek, steadily breasting the hill, knew by heart every line and curve, every chimney-stack, every lone tree printed darkly upon the sky. It was more to him than a happy conjunction of woods and hills and dwellings. It was part and parcel of his inner life.

From the sunlit ridge he swung down through the semi-twilight of Hadden Wood to the village of Coombe St. Mary's that had dozed unruffled through the centuries ; and was not fully awake, even now, to the ominous rumble of machinery in the North.

Already Derek was on his father's land ; and here

the sense of home struck deeper. More than the average young men of his age and station he had genuinely tried to make friends with those most inexpressive of all human creatures, the born tillers of the soil. Here and there he had succeeded better than he knew; better than any member of his family would have believed possible. For he had a knack of achieving a good deal, while apparently doing nothing in particular: a knack very characteristic of his race.

He had several friends of low degree in Coombe St. Mary's; but he did not talk about them; and they, for the most part, were dumb as their own kine. None of them were loafing at this hour in the one semblance of a street. Presently they would come slouching home from the fields, to congregate at the "Bull and Beetle." There they would drink their "usual," sitting on the same worn seats as their fathers, and probably their grandfathers, had done before them every working day of the year. Evening after evening they would exchange the same rough pleasantries and thrash out the same old grievances—grown so mellow with time that their belated removal would be but one grievance the more. Derek felt suddenly oppressed by the realization that all this bovine life of farm and field had been droning on unchanged, unenlivened, while he had been wandering at large; each day an uncharted realm of adventure; living, moving, learning all manner of vital odds and ends about other men's thoughts and ways—

On the hill above the village he paused and looked back into the sleepy hollow that had already lost the sun. He could see the first of the labourers trailing home from the fields ; and, watching them, he wondered idly which groove, after all, was deeper, more barren of healthy human vagaries—the agricultural ruts of his friends down there, or the narrow way of convention along which his mother and Van moved with such unerring precision ? If either of them could have seen him struggling against the mighty current of the Yser, for the sake of a bath and the mere sport of the thing, or crouching naked between two rocks within a few yards of clothed and spectacted propriety——!

He chuckled to himself at thought of the shock it would give them. For it is hardly too much to say that his own people knew almost as little of the real Derek, as he himself knew of the real working man. If home relations were not all that they might have been, it was tacitly assumed to be Derek's fault ; and, after a period of bitter inward rebellion, he had arrived at supposing they must be right. Of his recent trip abroad he had told them little or nothing. From Oxford he had written that he would devote the long vacation to a walking tour abroad and would probably be home about the middle of September. Since then, a few brief letters to his mother and an occasional postcard had given them a rough idea of his movements. That was all they knew about it—all they were ever likely to know.

Sometimes, in a regenerate mood, it pained him to realize how increasingly reticent he had grown about himself and his doings. But his mother's vague, polite inquiries were not calculated to unloose his tongue; and Lord Avonleigh held with Dr. Johnson, that "questioning is not a mode of conversation among gentlemen." As for Van, except in rare moods of expansion, he was frankly bored with most things that did not directly concern himself.

From this it may be gathered that Derek, at two and twenty, was still too square a peg for his very round and polished hole; which is not to say that he undervalued for a moment his goodly heritage of fine traditions stretching backward through the centuries. But those very traditions involved certain limitations that must not be allowed to hamper his choice of a path in life.

As a younger son, a certain amount of latitude was his; and a fourth year at Oxford was still on the cards. Pure luxury: no denying it. But he must be an unnatural son of Oxford who can lightly break his tie with that city of generous delusions, and life-long friendships. Personally, Derek was in no hurry for the decisive plunge. No gusty winds of ambition stirred his soul; but he recognized the wisdom of his father's insistence on a definite occupation for Van and a definite profession for himself.

Already his supposed indecision had caused a certain amount of home friction. Lord Avonleigh

had failed to divine the cause ; and Derek himself had signally failed to convey any impression of his complicated state of mind. The fact that he secretly craved his father's good opinion and admired the very qualities that made him so little accessible did not smooth the way for him—rather the reverse. After three months, presumably devoted to consideration of his future, decisions would be expected of him—and they would not be forthcoming !

That consideration cooled, a little, the glow of welcome in his heart when the ivy-mantled pillars and wrought iron gateway came into view. A narrower entrance near the Lodge stood open : but Derek—suddenly conscious of his own shabbiness—passed it by. Skirting a stone wall, that enclosed the Park, he found an iron-studded door, beloved from boyhood for its mediæval flavour. It opened on to a narrow path that meandered up through the rising sweep of parkland and finally struck into the drive, between dense ten-foot hedges of yew, close to the house itself.

Derek sauntered leisurely through that scattered company of great and ancient trees : oaks with their far-flung boughs defying the law of gravitation ; beeches with boles like grey satin, their cascades of incomparable leafage sweeping almost to the ground. Often and often, when the hands of all his world seemed against him, a small, lonely Derek had stolen away to his favourite beech tree as to a sanctuary. There, perched in the fork of a friendly bough, where the wrath of man could not come at

him, he had shed his "insect miseries" and found courage to return to the dusty arena of the nursery and the schoolroom and the dense stupidity of grown-ups who could not or would not understand. Derek was a catholic lover of trees ; but the beech, for more than mere personal reasons, stood first in his heart.

Now the level sun struck shafts of light through them and stretched out to interminable lengths their prodigies of shade. In the distance he sighted a herd of deer ambling down to the lake ; and the little wind that had chilled the glow within him died away. He felt suddenly eager to see them all again—especially his mother. Absence invariably quickened his deep natural feeling for her ; and he had never quite discovered why it evaporated so strangely after the first few days at home. Loyalty prevented him from analysing this plain proof of failure—somewhere. He supposed, ruefully, that the fault must be his.

Van—he knew, from her last letter—was lately back from Scotland : and if they were all at home, he might stumble on the remnants of tea under the cedars. The prospect quickened his movements. He was hungry and thirsty after his walk.

Emerging from between high walls of yew, he came full upon the house—a stately stone façade with mullioned windows and a square tower in the left wing. Ivy grew thick on the tower ; and across the whole wide front spread the tentacles of a giant wistaria ; it's plume-like foliage softening the sever-



ities of the stern old place. In a good blossoming year it was one of the sights of the neighbourhood. Week-end parties had been given in its honour.

Without entering the house, Derek passed through the long conservatory—alight with chrysanthemums—on to the main lawn, where three friendly cedars made a continent of shadow. The lawn itself swept on, innocent of impertinent flower-beds, down to the winding lake. Beyond the lake rose two wooded hills and the sweep of their interlacing curves framed a vision of blue distances darkly clear against the storm-swept sky.

Under the cedars were two small tables, garden chairs, and Persian rugs: Lady Avonleigh was mortally afraid of damp, burglars, telegrams and cockchafers. Between two low boughs a hammock was slung; and in the hammock Evan Blount sprawled at ease. One faultlessly flannelled leg hung over the edge revealing a glimpse of silk sock above a white tennis shoe. On a table at his elbow stood a cut glass jug and tumbler, a box of chocolates and two half-eaten peaches. His head, deep in a cushion, was hidden from view; but an ascending plume of cigarette smoke showed that he was not asleep.

Derek's footsteps made no sound on the turf; and he had just reached the shadow of the trees when Van, turning to flick the ash from his cigarette, was confronted by his brother's powerful, ill-dressed figure. But Van was not easily taken aback; and

at sight of Derek, he was simply rather more aware than usual of the contrast they presented—a contrast decidedly in his own favour.

As in boyhood, so in manhood, these two sons of one mother were astonishingly unlike. Van, the taller by several inches, had all the grace and pliability that Derek conspicuously lacked. In appearance he had changed less than his brother. He was still good-looking in a quite unaggressive, gentlemanly way. He had sleek mouse-coloured hair, cleanly cut features and a good-tempered mouth, under a carefully cherished moustache, the colour of ripe corn. The cut of his flannels was irreproachable and the tint of his socks was repeated in the butterfly bow of his tie. Inside and out, he was the finished product of his age and type.

“Hullo! *There* you are,” was his brotherly greeting. “The parents were wondering at lunch when you would deign to let them know if you were still on terms with this mortal coil—and all that —” He had raised himself on one elbow and at this point his brows went up a fraction of an inch—“Great Scott! where the deuce did you pick up those unholy garments?”

“At München,” Derek answered coolly, “from a bland and beery Teutonic gentleman, who prided himself on his English cut!”

Van laughed—a pleasant, lazy laugh that matched his voice and person. “About as English as the cut of the Wilhelmstrasse! But why patronise a

gentleman of that persuasion? What was the desperate stroke of Fate——?”

Derek paused a moment. The unholy garments had fairly given him away, and the fact that Van would not in the least understand made the tone of his explanation almost aggressively cool.

“Fact is, an enterprising Italian navy relieved me of my only pair.”

“You were trapesing about Europe with no more than you stood up in?”

“Just a shade more! A spare shirt and socks and some literature. In three months we covered quite a respectable deal of the Austrian and Bavarian landscape. Great sport! Streets better than slaughtering grouse. You should try it one summer.”

“And return to Avonleigh looking like an escaped scarecrow! No tha-anks. Grouse and salmon are good enough for me. Of course if you go hob-nobbing with such riff-raff as Italian navvies——”

“It didn't quite amount to hob-nobbing,” Derek remarked reassuringly; a certain expansiveness born of Jack's friendly company was still upon him. “In fact it came from deserting barns and haystacks for the flesh-pots of a respectable inn, where a gang of Italians, at work on the railway, were swilling beer. We left 'em swilling. We had tramped twenty miles over rough country and we were dog-tired. Our box of a room was like an oven. We flung everything open and Jack fixed up a simple booby trap across the door. But it was I who figured as the booby next morning! The whole

gang had moved on down the line ; and anyhow I wasn't likely to raise a hue and cry after my valuable property ! Luckily our money—what remained of it—was safe in my sovereign belt. Nothing for it but to tramp on to München in Jack's shabby old Burberry and knickerbocker stockings—on a blazing hot day, and the Wagner Festival in full swing ! You can fancy Jack and our host enjoyed that part of the joke more than I did."

Van chuckled.

" Upon my soul, Derek, you're the limit. For the honour of Avonleigh, Father ought not to let you run round on the loose except under a *nom de plume* ! As for Mother ! . . . Lucky it's her Cottage Hospital afternoon ; so you can get rid of your trophies before she sets eyes on you. The shock might bring on a heart attack ! "

It was the first chilling whiff of home atmosphere and it checked Derek's expansive mood.

" Just the sort of thing I *would* do—eh ?—by way of making myself thoroughly welcome ? " he said in a changed voice.

" Rot ! I was only ragging you. But the poor dear's had one jolt already to-day. At breakfast, Father calmly announced that he had an urgent letter from old Wyntoun offering him the Governorship of Bombay. Poor Fareham's crumpled up with the climate and they want to relieve him as soon as possible. I fancy they need a cooler head and a stronger hand out there. Anyhow, the upshot was—if Father cared to consider the appointment,

would he come to town at once?—And he's there now."

Derek let out his breath in a low whistle. "I suppose that means he'll be going soon.—And Mother?"

Van lifted his eyebrows. "She hasn't said much, but I can see it's shaken her a bit. I believe if there's one thing she hates more than a jolt it's a decision." He paused and chose a particular shape of chocolate that contained his favourite cream. "Rather hard luck on her that you should have chosen this particular day to drop out of the blue without a word of warning. Knowing her little weaknesses, old chap, you might have favoured her with some sort of intimation——"

Derek jerked up his head. "Damn! Never occurred to me. Fact is"—he flung out the truth that rankled—"my coming and going seems to make no great odds to any one. However,—lucky she's out. I can easily take myself off again. Tramp over to Ashbourne. Put up at the Avonleigh Arms and write to-night announcing the *precise* moment of my arrival——"

"My good idiot, you'll do nothing of the sort," Van struck in with drawling emphasis. "I merely submit the rational suggestion that you make yourself scarce—when you've *quite* done with my chocs—and get into something presentable. Then, when Mother appears, I can break the news to her with due tact. . . ."

"As if I were some sort of disaster! Thanks very

much. I'll spare you the trouble." He rose abruptly, almost over-setting the small table. "Another five miles won't hurt me. I'm in topping form——"

"But I say—have you had any tea?"

"No. This'll do."

He poured out the contents of the jug and tossed them off at a gulp. Van lay watching him with a faint *moue* of distaste. Not even in extremity could he see himself drinking out of another man's tumbler. But Derek was queer. From the superior height of six and twenty, he regarded his young brother's whole behaviour as flagrantly juvenile.

"But I say," he protested again. "It's ludicrous—farcical."

"I can't help that——" The obvious reflection on their mother checked further comment. "When does father get back?"

"To-morrow—I think. Early afternoon."

"Then I'll turn up a bit later. I'd be superfluous at the family council, if there is one."

Van shrugged and gave it up. "Oh well—if you *will* be a fool——"

"I'm not being a fool. I'm considering mother. But I prefer to do it in my own way. I'll go on through the woods over Burnt Hill; and I'll pinch the rest of your chocs to keep me going.—Many guests this week end? I've asked Jack to keep me in countenance."

"And I've asked Karl. Comte d'Estelles may be coming. Also Ina, with her recently annexed

K.C. And, I believe, Sir Eldred Lenox with the plain daughter. Women as plain as that ought to be painlessly extinguished at a tender age!"

"Van, you're a beast. You and your pretty women! Miss Lenox is a real good sort." He put on his cap. "Well—I'm off. See you all to-morrow."

Van, who had re-settled himself, merely waved his hand; but the distressful view of his brother's retreating figure spurred him to a final effort on his behalf.

"I say, Dirks," he called out and the boy swung round in his stride. "For God's sake don't turn up again in those Teutonic atrocities! I'll post you a decent pair to-night."

Derek grimaced. "Thanks awfully. Sorry they gave you a shock." And very soon a curve of the hill hid him from view.

Van heaved a sigh of relief, lit a fresh cigarette and resumed his placid contemplation of cedar branches, enamelled with turquoise where the sky gleamed through. He was just pleasantly tired. He wanted no more human eruptions. And once again he reflected that Derek was queer. A thorough good chap at bottom; but, in the ordinary way of life confoundedly uncomfortable. What the deuce did a fellow in his position want with tramping round Europe in shabby clothes, like any seedy school-master, hob-nobbing with foreign peasants and getting into a thoroughly undignified scrape for his pains. When a man had the privilege of belonging

to one of the oldest families in England ; when he had a beautiful home and the best houses open to him for shooting and fishing, with intervals for flirtation, why this deplorable craze for bemusing himself with the other fellow's point of view ?

From certain remarks Derek occasionally let fall, he gathered that this was one of the mainsprings of his brother's superfluous activities ; but from his own higher vantage point, he clearly perceived the futility of it all. The sense of status was very strong in Van. Even at Derek's age, he had never wasted his time or energy in worrying about the man on the other side of the hedge. A fellow didn't need to be a " crusted Conservative " to resent the vagaries of the " social conscience " crew. Personally Van counted himself a Liberal of the cultured, theoretical, peace-loving order. His social and political creed had been imbibed mainly from the intellectuals of his own set at Balliol, just as he had imbibed his code of conduct from the prevailing standard of Eton. A taste for ready-made views and values was of the essence of his character. For all practical purposes, it was quite as effective, and far less trouble to annex the nearest match to the fashion of the moment ; to live by those phrases and shibboleths that so pleasantly temper the harsh light of facts.

Such was Evan Blount's unformulated philosophy : one that he shared with quite a large number of so-called educated men. Yet he was no more a fool than are the majority of those others. His easy-going nature was enriched with a very fair



measure of his father's brains and humour. But from his mother he inherited an ingrained mental laziness, rooted in the love of material comfort; that fatally overflows into the region of the mind and spirit; refusing tacitly to probe too deep below the surface lest it stumble on disconcerting realities. It was this quality in him—not the aristocratic blood in his veins—that was mildly irritated by Derek's random, undignified interest in the world at large.

Van's interests, like his activities, travelled within the prescribed limits of his own particular circle in London and his own insignificant niche in the Government machine. When Lord Avonleigh wisely insisted on some definite form of occupation, Van—a Londoner at heart—had dutifully acquiesced in a decree that gave him an excuse to live in the only city on earth. For two years, now, he had been Private Secretary to a distinguished member of the Foreign Office. He believed in Sir Edward Grey as the prince of pacifists, and in the divine right of every man to go his own way, so long as he refrained from treading on his neighbour's toes. He also believed in a friendly Germany and the financial impossibility of a European war. These were distinctly comforting beliefs, which was perhaps the main reason why they found favour in his eyes.

It was Derek's chief failing that he could not or would not accept the face value of men and things. He had too much of the Moray element in his composition. It might be very admirable, but it

made him rather a doubtful blessing to his family. Van thanked Heaven that he himself bore the impress of his very English mother. He also reflected without conscious pharisaism, that for the honour of Avonleigh—which was genuinely dear to him—Fate had done well to bring him first into the world. Upon which satisfying conclusion he presently fell asleep.

### CHAPTER III

“ One near one is too far.”—BROWNING.

“ I want no opiates,  
I want to be co-equal with their fates . . .  
I want to be awake and know ;—not stand  
And stare at waving of a conjurer’s wand.”

T. E. BROWN.

IT may safely be asserted that no member of the family would have been readier to endorse that conclusion than Derek himself ; in spite of early disillusion and the fact that his robust allegiance was tempered with criticism and occasionally tinctured with envy. This evening both were in the ascendant. Van had a perfect genius for putting him in the wrong ; and the fact that he, Derek, had brought it on himself did not mend matters to any extent.

Swinging down the gentle slope to the lake, he began to feel half ashamed of his resentment at the idea of having his own carelessness thrown into strong relief by an exhibition of Van’s consideration for their mother’s little fads. As an isolated incident, the thing seemed too trivial for words. But it was not isolated. It was symptomatic of a chronic state

of things. And, because, at heart, he was angry with himself, Van's characteristic offer had touched him on the raw. For the moment sheer temper had mastered him and he had acted like a fool. But that honest admission did not dispel the smouldering jealousy and soreness—sensations that hurt none the less because they were familiar as the outline of Burnt Hill against the sky. For, in the deep of his stormy heart, he loved his parents and Avonleigh with a hidden intensity of which his brother was sheerly incapable. And he had always been secretly jealous of Van—especially as regards their mother. The very fact of her faintly repressive sweetness and graciousness—as of one moving in becalmed regions of the soul—had increased his natural tendency to set her in a place apart. Yet—as far back as he could remember—that healthy boyish impulse of worship had been checked and chilled at every turn. Either through clumsiness, or through his very honesty; he never seemed long out of trouble. It had become a nursery and schoolroom saying that “hot water was Derek's natural element”; and on an occasion of peculiar bitterness, he had flung back the retort that cold water seemed to be his natural portion. Always between him and his mother stood Van—kindly, easy-going, selfish, with an innate aptitude for saying and doing the right thing. Always between him and his awe-inspiring father stood Ina—lively and self-assured, hardening early into the type that blossoms in society and reserves its best gifts for the outside world.

So it came about that, in this beautiful home of his, surrounded with every physical care and comfort, he had missed the chief need of his nature; vaguely at first; then more consciously, more acutely as the years went on. And the colour of his past tinged the colour of the future. Temperament and circumstance combined to make him a pessimist in the grain.

This evening as he climbed Burnt Hill, his mood of smouldering antagonism to every one and everything brought back to him, with peculiar vividness, the emotions of that long ago night when he had cried himself to sleep, poor little fool, because he was convinced his mother did not really love him, nor ever would. Scarcely realized by himself—and never to this hour realized by Van—that incident of the broken vase had proved a turning point in their whole relation. It was the key to much of their underlying discord; their odd alternations of hostility and brotherly allegiance; and it had awakened, in Derek, the dim beginnings of jealousy in respect of his gentle, soft-mannered mother, who so obviously had eyes for no one but Van. The tacit implication was that whatever he did must be right: and it is scarcely surprising if Derek came to feel, in bitter moments, that whatever *he* did must be wrong. Very sharp is the sword of injustice wielded by a blindly idolising mother; and the wounds thus inflicted sank deep into the younger boy's heart.

But if Derek was sensitive, he was also proud and stubborn. His temper was of the formidable white-

hot order ; and his very virtues were tinged with this hidden intensity of spirit, so that he gave and demanded a more robust sincerity than is favoured by the easy-going majority.

Unhappily these were the last qualities that Lady Avonleigh could be expected to approve or understand ; but the full realization of this had only been brought home to him by slow and painful degrees. His faith in her had survived—in spite of many jars—till the critical day when first the insincerities and inconsistencies of life and religion had begun to bewilder his soul. Thrown back on himself and terribly in earnest, he had so far done violence to his boy's reserve as to make a clean breast of his doubts and difficulties, in the sure conviction that she could not fail to understand. . . .

But most completely and tragically she had failed to understand. She had simply been pained and puzzled, like a hen when the duckling she has hatched shows a predilection for the wrong element and wrong farm-yard morsels.

Derek, impelled by his urgent need, had persisted and argued, till the truth came home to him that she was shocked, even a little repelled, by his questing attitude towards sacred conventions and mysteries, which it was a Christian's duty to accept blindly by an act of faith. Of course one knew that now-a-days nothing was sacred, everything torn to pieces by certain sorts of people ; but she *had* hoped that her own sons . . .

The murmured word "blasphemous" revealed her lamentable misunderstanding of this particular son. It also closed his lips on the subject for good. He had come to her, hungry and eager, asking for bread : and she, quite unwittingly, had given him a stone. He did not come to her again.

Gradually he had grown to accept misunderstanding as his portion ; but although his faith in her was shaken, his incurable boy's loyalty remained.

Thus he had grown to manhood in a certain loneliness of heart and spirit, mitigated by the comradeship of school and the fuller, frèer human fellowship of Oxford. There was his real life. The impalpable influences of that grave and stately city had lastingly imbued his mind and character. As a Blue, and finally Captain of the Trinity Fifteen, he had won some measure of popularity, in his own despite : but perhaps the chief personal event of those good years at Winchester and Trinity had been his friendship with Mark Forsyth ; his natural complement in all things save one—and that the keynote of both characters—a robust sincerity and a hatred of shams. At Wynchcombe Friars he was always happy, always at his ease ; though there were moments when the perfect freedom and confidence between Lady Forsyth and her sons hurt him a good deal more than he cared to confess even to himself.

During the long pull up Burnt Hill, the unbidden thought intruded : How different everything would

have been had he dropped in *there* without warning ! He rebuked himself for the comparison, but it rankled none the less.

He reached the ridge just before sunset ; and there, sitting on a clump of heather, applied himself to Van's costly chocolates with a will. Hunger apart, he was in no hurry for the stuffy inn parlour of the Avonleigh Arms. Up here it was spacious and wholesome and silent and there would probably be a fine flare-up after the storm.

By this time he felt almost grateful to Van for having thrust upon him another twenty-four hours of vagabondage. A yarn with old Tom Gosling, the publican, would be more congenial to his present mood than the simple, perfectly-appointed, yet formal dinner at Avonleigh Hall.

Moreover, if his father were likely soon to be leaving England, the dreaded interview on the choice of a profession could not much longer be postponed. During this last year at Oxford he had considered several possibilities with no very encouraging result. Everywhere he found cast iron systems, a good deal the worse for wear, shackling the free spirit of man ; stultifying his genuine zeal. Everywhere ruts and grooves lay in wait for his rebellious feet : deep and ancient ruts that scored the face of the civilized world like railway lines, along which one could move swiftly and safely in certain directions and in those directions only. Honesty compelled the admission that without them human traffic would become woe-fully disorganized ; but they irked him none the less.



Last term, he remembered in his rooms, some one had started a lively argument on the psychology of grooves; a brilliant and bewildering argument, epigrams and cushions flying; and Mark, in great form, clinching the debate with a popular local quatrain:

“ There was a young man who said ‘ Damn ! ’  
At *last* I’ve found out what I am.  
I’m a creature that moves  
In predestinate grooves ;  
I’m not even a ‘ bus—I’m a tram ! ”

His guests had departed chanting the “ Hymn of Predestination ” : but Derek would have none of it. A tram symbolized all that he least admired or desired in life. A ‘ bus was a free-lance by comparison ; and a ‘ bus he proposed to remain so long as Fate and the inexorable laws of common sense would permit. But the crux of the matter was—how would his father regard that very unorthodox aspiration ? Mercifully he was of age and his allowance secure ; but he felt the need of some definite programme to mitigate inevitable disapproval——

Meantime—he had finished the chocolates ; and if he sat mooning much longer on Burnt Hill he would miss his last chance of a square meal. There was also the note to his mother. He knew himself capable—almost—of walking five miles in order to write it—and forgetting it in the end.

He rose briskly, and stood a moment surveying the wide emptiness of the scene under a windy sky

dappled with flakes of cloud, that in the west, were caught and changed to flakes of fire.

Burnt Hill—though a mere heat-bump, as hills go—was, on its far side, sufficiently abrupt to command sweeping views ; on one hand, towards the downs and the sea ; on the other, across billowing country, toward the pine and heather region round Aldershot. Lord Avonleigh had been tempted, often, by offers from the new-made rich, for one of the finest building sites in the neighbourhood. But although his large estate was heavily hampered, Burnt Hill was sacred ; almost a part of his own grounds. Only in one instance he had succumbed ; and as twilight engulfed the valley, the visible sign of that surrender flaunted its naked ugliness upon the skyline, breaking the noble sweep of the ridge.

Derek vaguely resented that impertinent presence, for which Jack's father was mainly responsible. In provocative moods he would allude to it as " Your family's commercial thumb mark on our holy hill." Its tenant, a solitary man of science, was reputed to be on the track of chemical discoveries that might mean " a very big thing " for the Burlton Works, a large old-established metal industry in the Midlands. The whole venture was admittedly a speculation ; and Lord Avonleigh—as a prominent shareholder—took a mildly sceptical interest in it : hence his surrender to Burlton's importunity. Their protégé was a shy, inoffensive creature with a damaged lung ; and it had been part of the compact that Burlton—should secure for him a peaceful retreat, in bracing

air, where he could set up laboratories and carry on his work unmolested by the idle curiosity of country neighbours.

That was three years ago : and the Hermit of Burnt Hill was still pursuing his researches, apparently without result. Derek, more often than any member of the family, came across him in his wanderings on the ridge—a small shrunken figure in a shabby over-coat with a squash felt hat and smoked glasses. As a student of mysteries, the boy had regarded him with mingled interest and awe. He had even made shy advances when they met ; but the results had been disappointing, and Derek had given him up as a bad job. Latterly he had come to regard the household with vague suspicion ; though what manner of harm that frail and lonely body could be doing in his aerie Derek would have found it hard to say. Perhaps on that account, perhaps from mere habit, he had kept the feeling to himself.

To-night he lingered a little—while the flakes of fire in the west faded to pinks and mauves and ethereal greys—watching that angular shadow on the spur just below him ; wondering, with the insistent curiosity of youth, what Mr. Bridgeman really did with himself all day and whether those mysterious researches would ever come to anything and retrieve Burlton's affairs. He supposed his father knew whatever there was to know about the old fellow. And after all—why should there be anything wrong ?

“ The poor chap’s probably a saint with a passion for stinks, who says his prayers a good deal oftener than I do,” was Derek’s charitable conclusion, as he turned away and strode rapidly down the hill

## CHAPTER IV

“ The gift is to the giver—and comes back most to him.”

WALT WHITMAN.

HALF an hour later he was enjoying a hearty supper in Gosling's parlour behind the bar of the Avonleigh Arms, with old Tom and young Bert for company, quenching his thirst and drowning fanciful suspicions in a mug of sound English ale.

The elder Gosling—a devoted adherent—beamed all over his broad ugly face, sliced a home-cured ham in his best professional manner and begged leave to crack a bottle of “ fine old crusty ” in honour of the occasion.

Bert, just turned twenty, gave no outward sign of sharing his father's satisfaction. He was a shrewd looking youth, equipped—by the dangerous process of semi-education—with a mass of half-digested knowledge and a flourishing crop of prejudices. His innate distrust of the “ real gentry ” was tempered with grudging admiration: the silver-gilt article, rapidly over-running the earth, he distrusted through and through. He would sell his soul to no

“ blooming capitalist ”—not if he knew it. Yet—in these degenerate days—what promise of advancement for any self-respecting man on the land? From the horns of this dilemma, he had leaped to the one unfailing conclusion—Canada : and he was engaged in the critical process of persuading his father to back his venture with a hundred pounds of capital when Derek appeared on the scene.

The interruption was probably more welcome to the father than to the son, whose respectful but slightly guarded friendliness threw the old man’s geniality into stronger relief.

As for Derek—either from sheer perversity, or from larger, hidden causes—he felt no *gêne* here, in this stuffy back room, over full of photographs and horsehair furniture : no chilling sense of repression that so often kept him silent at home. With his brain still full of vivid memories, he gave his host a lively account of other inns among the Austrian Highlands, of alfresco suppers, of village bumpkins prancing with local beauties to the scraping of village violins.

They agreed, all three, in regretting that such homely sociabilities no longer enlivened the English country-side. Gosling laid the blame with a trowel on the ubiquitous picture-palace, “ where folks, too lazy to do nothink else, sits an’ gapes like a herd o’ penned cattle.” But—the interrupted talk with Bert being much on his mind—he could not long keep thoughts or tongue from straying back to his pet political grievance—the land. Moreover

though Derek was young, he plainly had a head on his shoulders ; and his opinion on the Canada scheme might be worth hearing if no more.

A brief pause in the talk, while Bert refilled their mugs, gave the old man his chance.

" It *do* be queer, Mr. Derek, how things fall out," he began, turning his bleared blue eyes from one young face to the other. " Just afore you come in, there was Bert and me dead-locked, so to speak it, in a argyment about a notion 'e's set upon ; and seems like Providence sent you along at the fizzicological moment—as the noospaper men say—to give us the castin' vote."

Bert's attempt to kick his rather under the table merely brought him up against Derek's foot, that was politely withdrawn.

" Beg pardon, sir. A touch o' the cramp," he muttered, reddening ; and Gosling babbled on, unhindered—unaware.

" It's a common tale enough, sir, these days. Here's this boy of mine can't stomach the town nor fact'ry line o' life no more'n his father ; but havin' a better 'ead-piece and better schoolin', 'e's a bit too ambitious, 'e says, to dump 'isself down on a farm an' stick there."

" Too much ever-an-ever-amen sort o' business for my taste," objected Bert, still sulky but determined to get in his oar. " This world's a middlin' big place ; an' jest reading about it all seems a rotten okyerpation for a chap like me. What's the bloomin' use of eyes and ears, an' trains an' steamers

scootin' all over the earth, if a man's ter sit chained up like a dog to a kennel all 'is days ? ”

“ There's kennel-dogs as can sniff out a deal o' 'uman nature when the fleas don't keep 'em too busy,” rejoined the good-natured old publican with a wink of his watery eye. “ But them that grins an' runs about the city carries their tails higher an' barks the loudest.”

“ They've more call to—most of 'em.” Bert stuck stubbornly to his point. “ They git a chance to catch more'n fleas—*they*. do. I'll lay Mr. Derek takes my meanin'. He've just bin runnin' round himself——”

“ *Now* then—no impidence to a son of 'is Lordship ! ”

The old-time spirit of allegiance—very strong in Gosling—moved his son to a smile, tinged faintly with contempt.

“ I hadn't any thought o' such narrer rot : nor I'm sure Mr. Derek hadn't neither.” And, as Derek mutely confirmed that assurance, Bert went on : “ The likes o' *you*, sir, can run around just for play-time. The likes of us, if we want to catch more'n fleas (as I said), we've got to take the plunge outright ; sink or swim. See ? ”

“ And you want to take the plunge ? ” Derek asked with quickened interest. “ In what direction ? ”

“ Australy or Canada for choice, where a chap can work on the land for a decent livin' wage an' get a chance to rise out o' the rut, if 'e's worth 'is



salt. I got a friend out British Columbia way, makin' a good thing of it. Married an' all. 'E says, 'Bring along a bit o' capital an' join in with me.' Dad, here, says 'e's for laying 'is money on England. I tell him he'll git twice the return for it out there."

"An' I says old England needs the money an' she needs the men," Gosling lunged in, perceiving Bert's attempt to enlist Derek against him. "An' I say the mighty clever folks that ruined the land wi' their Free Trade tomfoolery *do* be responsible for this pretty state o' things; that there's more good British money an' men goin' out o' this country every year. An' I call it damned unpatriotic if you ar'st me. I'm none o' yer cosmipolitans—no, thank yer. An' as fer his demikratic twaddle——!" He sniffed scornfully. "That's wot Bert's after, 'e is. Ole England's not movin' that way fast enough to suit 'is ejjicated taste. I tell 'im they kind can sling the words, easy as winkin'; but all it amounts to is—'Pull down the man on top an' stand on 'is 'ead yerself. Pick 'is pockets in the sacred name o' freedom an' stuff 'is money in yer own!' I may be a old fool; kennel-dogs mostly is, 'cordin' to Bert. But it do seem like as we'd most on us be better men—and better off maybe—if all sorts 'ud 'ave a good old try at pullin' together, 'stead o' pullin' every which ways to once, and scratchin' each other's eyes out, between whiles, for rekereation——"

That word lit a spark in Bert's shrewd, greenish eyes.

“ Recreation be jiggered ! ” he retorted hotly. “ If it’s a joke to them, it’s life an’ death to us. As for pullin’ together—no fear ; seein’ the interests o’ both parties pulls two ways.”

“ Aye, but *do* they, if ye take a straight look at things ’stead o’ squintin’ contempshus down yer nose ? Where’d labour be if there was no landlords nor masters to screw more wages out of, eh ? In my ’umble notion ’tis jes’ the man and wumman business all over. They must ’ave their slap at each other to ease theirselves ; but atween the slaps they *got* to pull together or what ’ud come to creation ? But ’oo’s agoin’ to larn that to Bert an’ ’is lot ? Not no bloomin’ furriners an’ upstarts. ’Tis the jennywyne article, like yerself, Mr. Derek, that’s gettin, too scarce in ’igh places. I ’ad one of ’em sleepin’ ’ere on’y larst week ; trampin’ the country, same as you ; an’ we got talkin’ this way : an’ ’e says to me, ‘ Mr. Goslin’, ’e says, ‘ we’m natural born alleys, we Tories, and them as work on the land. That was Dizzy’s notion,’ ’e says ; ‘ an if any man ever ’ad ’is ’ead screwed on tight it was ’im.’ ”

Derek nodded.

“ Quite so. But a good deal has happened since then. Most of you fellows have simply become pawns in the game of the middle-class Liberals. With catchwords and half truths, they’ve made bad blood between us and you for their own ends ; and it’s *your* vote they’re counting on to help them play old Harry with the British Constitution.”

At that, the spark in Bert’s eye leaped to a flame.

“ You mean they’ve took us in all along the line ? ”

“ About two thirds of the line, I should say.”

“ Mr. Derek, sir, that’s a lie, no matter if the King spoke it.”

“ Now then—you keep yer mouth shut ! ” old Gosling shouted, emphasizing the command with a very square fist. “ No disrespect to ’is Majesty under my roof. Nor to ’is Lordship’s son neither. Mr. Derek ain’t no fancy talker, tellin’ you ’lection lies such as you swallered without blinkin’ year before last. I kin remember the treacle they powered over us in nineteen ’six better nor neither o’ you. All we ’ad to do was to fling in the votes, damn Joe Chamberlain, dish the Tories—an’ ’ey presto, a new ’eaven an’ earth would come along by express train ! That express got off the rails somewhere, I’m thinkin’, afore ever it reached England.”

Bert began to look a little crestfallen. “ But we got the People’s Budget,” he urged with less assurance. “ And the Land Schéme an’ Insurance.”

“ Ninepence for fourpence ! *Ef* you believe in it ! Eh, Mr. Derek ? ”

“ Precisely ! ” Derek agreed with a twinkle.

“ What’s wrong with it then ? ” the boy flung in angrily.

“ It’s just tinkering, Bert,” Derek said more gravely. “ Clumsy, slap-dash tinkering with German tools. That’s been the tune of it all round, these last few years : sops flung to those who shout the loudest ; but no serious attempt to tackle the wages problem, strikes, lock-outs, housing. It’s more

showy, smashing things up and hiding the damage with a coat of varnish, than digging the real foundations of a new heaven and earth. As for your Insurances and things—hasn't it ever struck you that each time the State gives you ninepence for fourpence with one hand, it steals away a bit of your personal liberty with the other? And when that's gone on long enough you'll all be like so many sheep in a pen, with the State for your shepherd and not a foot of free space to kick your heels in. If you think I'm piling it on, go to Germany for a spell, instead of Canada, and keep your eyes and ears open. Over there the average man is so coddled by the State that he can't call his soul his own; and the Radicals and Socialists you vote for are mapping out their patent paradise on much the same lines."

"Oh Lord!—I never saw it *that way*."

Derek suppressed a smile.

"Of course not," he said quietly. "If many of you were allowed to see it that way it would spoil the show."

"An' we got to walk into their sheep's pen blindfolded? Thanks orf'ly—for nothin'!"

He pushed back his chair impatiently and got upon his feet. The meal was over and Gosling was filling his pipe.

"Tell you what, Dad. You say I can believe Mr. Derek. Well, if the old country's goin' the way he says, that puts the top on my argyment for Canada. You said Providence sent him along to give the castin' vote. Let him give it. I'm agreeable."

Derek looked from father to son with his sudden smile. "Gosling's right about England needing her own men and money. But till she can produce a statesman strong enough to save the situation, no one can blame go-ahead young fellows like you for preferring to try their luck elsewhere. As to the capital—you can't very well ask me to vote away another man's money!"

"'Ear, 'ear!" Gosling applauded with his knife handle. "'E'd vote away another chap's money on 'isself without blinking, would Bert! A cool 'underd 'e's askin', an' 'im not me first born, neither. Thar's young Tom—that steps into my shoes—doin' well on' is own. An' that's James workin' steady under Farmer Groves. What'll 'e say, then, if I plump a nice bit o' capital on Bert? Not ter mention thar's George comin' on and my two gals—I ax you, Mr. Derek, plain and straight—afore you git votin' away my earnin's—does Bert, there, strike you as a likely sort o' 'vestment—eh? 'E's got the brains, all right; an' 'e's got the push. 'E swears, if 'e does well, 'e'll pay me back: an' ef 'e gets 'isself in a knot 'e won't come on me to fy-nance 'is resurrekshun. Ef you wos in my place would yer feel like backin' 'im to the tune of a round 'undred?"

The luckless Bert—completely taken aback—grew red with mingled rage and awkwardness; redder still under the scrutiny of Derek's direct and smiling gaze. Only acute curiosity checked the overflow of his pent up wrath: and Derek's momentary hesitation seemed to him interminable

"Tell him you wouldn't be no such dam-fool—and be done with it," he muttered, clenching and unclenching the hands he had thrust into his pockets.

Derek's smile deepened. "I'm not so sure." Then, turning to Gosling, he said quietly: "The truth is—I feel like backing him myself to the tune of fifty, if you can manage the rest. I can see he's in earnest. Why not give him his chance?"

If Bert had been taken aback before, he now simply stood confounded. His mouth had gone dry with nervous excitement; the whole thing was so remote from his wildest imaginings that he had not a ghost of a notion what he ought to say.

Old Gosling, it seemed, was in no such dilemma. His voice broke in harshly on the exultant confusion of the boy's thoughts.

"Now then, Bert, be you struck deaf and dumb? Up and tell Mr. Derek you'll never fergit 'is generous offer, but you an' me ain't got no right to 'is money \_\_\_\_\_"

Bert's heart dropped like a stone into his boots; but before he could screw himself to the painful point of obedience, Derek was speaking again.

"Nonsense, nonsense!" he said, a touch of brusqueness in his tone. "I'd sooner hear him speak the truth and say outright that he'll be jolly glad of that fifty and he wouldn't refuse it for a kingdom."

Bert's irrepressible grin told him he had hit the mark; and there flashed a look between them that seemed to put the awkward business of giving and taking on a perfectly natural footing. Lord's son

and publican's son, they were boys before all, with the human link of youth between them.

"Thought so!" Derek chuckled and rose from the table as if to conclude the matter. "We'll take it as said! And that squares things so far as I'm concerned. You can settle the rest without my help."

"But Mr. Derek—sir——" the old man protested; and Derek heard the ghost of a tremor in his voice.

"All right, Gosling. Nothing to worry about," he said in a changed tone. "Give you my word, my father would approve. And—er—look here, if my room's ready, I think I'll turn in. I'm dog tired."

"Yes, sir. *Quite* ready, sir. Molly shall bring the hot water." Gosling's professional manner came timely to his aid. With remarkable alacrity he pounced upon the door handle; and perhaps for the first time that automatic sign of respect was, for him, a genuine expression of the real thing.

"I s'pose, sir," he ventured, emboldened by Derek's friendly nod of acknowledgment—"An old man an' a fawther do be allowed to say thank 'ee?"

Derek smiled. "Honour bright, Gosling, all the thanks I want is to know you'll play up to my lead."

"You kin rely on me, sir. An' please God the boy'll not shame yer good opinion, though 'e *do* seem to 'ave lost 'is senses and 'is tongue——"

"He'll recover them! Good night, Bert." He nodded over his shoulder at the figure on the hearth-rug.

“ Good night, Mr. Derek.”

And if Bert had lost his tongue, there was an unmistakable note in his voice that gratified Derek more than any stumbling attempt at thanks, however sincere.



## CHAPTER V

"Aristocrats are the same everywhere, whether they have titles, or whether they have none. They are those who believe they owe their best to God and men—and they serve."—PRICE COLLIER.

THE best bed-room of the Avonleigh Arms was filled to overflowing with a curtained four-poster, and an imposing suite of early Victorian mahogany. In the negligible space between, it was possible to move circumspectly as became the discreet period to which the room and its trappings belonged.

Mrs. Gosling, Derek supposed, had slept in that bed on her wedding night and every night after—except for an occasional seaside trip—till the day of her death, some five years ago. Above the washing stand hung an enlarged photograph of her with smooth-plastered hair and a medallion brooch as big as a duck's egg. It was a pleasant, shrewd face, with a strong look of Bert about the eyes and brow. Perhaps she also, in feminine fashion, had yearned beyond the skyline. Perhaps she would have understood better than his father her son's remark, "too

much ever-and-ever-amen sort o' business, for my taste."

It was those words, more than anything else, that had awakened Derek's sympathy for the sulky boy who had so evidently resented his intrusion and old Gosling's burst of confidence. In point of fact, they were more than half responsible—though he did not guess it—for the third act of sheer impulse that stood to his credit—or discredit—in one short day. Yet, had any one called him a creature of impulse, he would have stoutly—and rightly—denied the impeachment. It would be nearer the truth to say that certain root qualities in him were so vigorous, so assured, that when the appeal was to one of these, action was swift and prompt, unhampered by the wavering that besets a more complex frame of mind. Perhaps this is why a genuine act of impulse—as distinct from the headlong rushings of the unbalanced—is so rarely regretted. We mistrust, at our peril, the deeper promptings of the heart, which, in vital matters, steers a truer course than the head through the cross currents of life.

Derek went straight to the square bay window, and flung every casement wide. After weeks of living in the open, curtains and windows still seemed inventions of the devil.

Outside there were stars and pale wisps of cloud. A gibbous moon hung low and red over Burnt Hill faintly illuminating the queer medley of houses, old and new. The street was lighted in patches by occasional lamp-posts set very wide apart. A ghost

of a breeze stirred the sycamore under the window; and that faint sound intensified the larger stillness beyond.

Derek yawned, settled himself in the one armchair, and leisurely filled his pipe—a short-stemmed briar of great virtue, given him by Mark. The statement that he was dog-tired had been a pardonable exaggeration, an excuse to escape from the consequences of his own act. He was just sufficiently tired to feel that smoking a pipe in an armchair and casually turning over the contents of his brain was occupation enough for any man of average intelligence. And the day's events provided much material for reflection. Breakfast and Paris seemed endless ages away. He had parted from Jack, at Waterloo, with the remark: "We're on the rails again. No adventures *this* journey!" And it was quite in keeping with the general contrariety of things that, since then, he had stumbled on the unexpected at every turn.

More than ever now, he was glad of the impulse—though it sprang from temper—that had sent him on to Ashbourne. Queer how often such trifles seemed to form hinges on which the big things turned. To-night, in Gosling's stuffy little parlour, he had stumbled, almost accidentally, on the fulfilment of an ambition dating from the time when first his acute sense of justice and sympathy with the under dog had given him a tilt towards Socialism; a tilt hardly to be escaped these days, by any thoughtful young man. How far it propels him, is largely a

matter of temperament, circumstance and—dare one add?—an innate capacity for facing facts. Derek, as has been seen, already began to detect the fundamental flaws in that Utopian panacea for every ill that man's flesh and spirit and bank-book are heir to. He was critical of men and things simply because of his urgent need to know their real nature and because the doubting, searching spirit of the true sceptic lay at the root of his hunger for knowledge and truth. Very early he had realized that the School and University he loved were mere tributaries to the turbulent main stream of life. Very early his brain and heart had reached out to those vast regions beyond the fringes of mere pleasantness in which he lived, he and his kind.

If only he could enter into those regions! If he could, even in a measure feel, from within, the struggles of those who live bravely and bitterly, whose hand is against the comfortable, the leisured, the rich! Then, perhaps, he might arrive at discovering whether there was any virtue in the nostrums of idealists for the sins and sorrows of the great submerged.

State activities were all very well—up to a point. But so far as these had gone, under a wildly experimental Government, they had not filled him with enthusiasm. The selfish, demoralizing antagonism between master and men seemed, if possible, more acute than ever. Yet he distrusted, innately, the champions of wholesale subversion. He refused to believe that the world could possibly be a better

place to live in for any one, if Labour Members wrangled in the House of Lords, and Buckingham Palace were converted into a home for slum babies or decayed gentlewomen. He was saved from such futilities both by his own temperament and by his inherited faith in England's moderate Constitutional Monarchy. But he had his share of the divine discontent and healthy rebelliousness that is the Englishman's prerogative and a sure guarantee that England is an abiding city.

One thing was certain, the move in the right direction ought to come from the men at the top. If aristocracy meant anything it meant a genuine spirit of service and of leadership toward those less-favoured by heritage and tradition; a deeper, more personal sense of responsibility among those who have, toward those who have not. As for favoured casuals, like himself, it was simply and obviously "up" to them to give those others a hand out of the mud and the ruts whenever opportunity offered.

This last conviction was no mere heady impulse of youth haloed with vague sentimentalism. It was a deep and dumb necessity of his nature that might yet land him in troubled waters: a quality that must have made his mother at once proud and anxious, had she eyes for any one on earth but her elder son. To-night his first real chance had been given him; and in his unhesitating response to it you have the measure of his conviction.

But Bert's case was a comparatively simple affair: just a matter of cash. Among those others—the

rank and file of the Many—cash was not the only, nor even the surest, solvent of the difficulties that crushed their spirits and embittered their lives. The puzzle of puzzles for Derek—as for all who have honestly travelled the same road—was how to get at them ; how learn to think their thoughts, see life from their angle of vision ?

Superficially, of course, the thing was done, every day by scores of zealous Churchmen and amateurs in philanthropy. Derek knew something of that from disconcerting personal experience. He had spent part of more than one vacation at the East End Mission House of his College ; strong in the conviction that young Oxford, very much in earnest, must have a genuine message, genuine gifts for those outside the gates. But soon he had discovered, to his frank astonishment, that young Oxford—and young Cambridge no less—had more to learn and to receive from that underworld of struggle and limitation than had seemed possible upon a superficial survey of both.

This, in itself, was a stimulating discovery. The trouble began when he perceived that the bulk of his fellow-workers—earnest and sincere men, honestly intent on “ lifting the masses ”—had never made it at all. It was as if one vital channel of communication were blocked ; and it possibly accounted for a good deal of disheartening failure. Derek—who preferred the uncoloured truth to rosy phantasies—had made the fatal mistake of supposing that the inmates of clergy houses, mission centres

and clubs must be of the same mind in regard to this first requisite of knowledge and understanding. But—again to his surprise—he found that it was not so ; and there had been more than one jar because he had ventured to speak his mind.

Rebuffed and puzzled, he had turned from his fellows, to the men and boys who came readily enough to their meetings and clubs. With them he had farèd better—up to a point. Beyond it, he could make no real headway : and he came to feel, increasingly, that the whole fabrication was built upon a pleasant sham. In place of truths he was offered shibboleths ; and half the young ordinands he met seemed amazingly out of touch with realities : well-meaning, spiritual minded men, content to live and work in water-tight compartments, impervious to the more rousing and staggering facts of life. That there were notable exceptions goes without saying : but in the end, Derek had retired baffled by the intangible barrier of caste, by the complacence of enthusiasts who dispensed their own particular brand of other-worldly wisdom, like a patent medicine, too often with scant knowledge of the patient's actual, urgent needs.

Derek's valiant efforts to emulate them had merely made him feel a Pharisee for his pains. Everything was so easy for him ; so hard for the men and boys of whose handicaps and struggles he knew next to nothing, except that most of them had probably never been given a fair chance.

Baffled in his first round, he refused to accept

defeat. He would get at them yet—those others—in defiance of obstacles and grooves. He was beginning to think it could best be done by trying to share their experience and so catch a glimpse of their point of view. But—a large “but”—how far was it possible for a man, well-born like himself, to become merged, for a time in the “unseen leaven of goodwill and fellowship working in the common bread.” Practical difficulties would be many and obvious; but the idea had not yet reached the practical stage. It had lain hidden in him, for months, like a seed germinating in the dark: and to-night—stimulated by Bert’s ambition and Miss de Vigne’s departure for Canada—it sent a green shoot above ground in the shape of a feasible plan.

Admittedly, Lord Avonleigh’s son could not become a working man in any part of the British Isles. But away there, on the other side of the world, it would be a comparatively simple matter. Why not have the courage of his conviction and make the plunge?

A few years of roughing it would do him no earthly harm. He was blessed with a fine constitution. Much “footer” and running had made him “hard as nails.” His family at home had no particular use for him; and he suddenly realized that Avonleigh without his father would be unendurable. If he intended to leave England, now was the acceptable time. And again—why not?

His imagination caught fire. Details crowded into his brain. He would go out steerage, of course.



The thing must be done thoroughly. And he would take merely a handful of capital such as most emigrants scrape together for a nest egg against very rainy days. Beyond that, he would not touch his allowance. He would learn what it meant for a man to make his own way against odds, in a world where he was nothing more than so much raw human energy and capacity to be hired by the week or the month. If half the tales one heard were true, the fact that he was of gentle birth would excite no particular suspicion or surprise. Canada and Australia were full of Army and University men who had gone under, either through ill fortune or ill doing : and he must resign himself to being reckoned a fragment of that lost legion.

A passing temptation to go out with Bert—unknown, of course, to any one but Bert—was promptly thrust aside. That would be to shirk the genuine adventure ; to make an artificial thing of it, like fancy slumming. Also—there was the honour of Avonleigh ; dear to him as to any of them, in spite of Van's velvety scratch about a *nom de plume*. On this occasion, Van need feel no qualms. The *nom de plume* was an essential part of his equipment—

And with a start he discovered that this trifling affair of changing his name was the most distasteful part of the whole business : so distasteful that, for a moment, he half swerved from his resolve. He had as little self love in him as any young man of his years : but he found—with a touch of amused dismay—that he loved his own name. Its link with

the inner Derek was vital and he felt sure he would never answer to any other. The impulse that, in its broad aspect, had seemed simple enough, grew more complex the longer he looked at it . . .

Suddenly, through the fog of his dilemma, there flashed a happy idea. He had merely to knock the "o" out of Blount—and his name was shorn of its link with his father's house. "Derek" he could not bring himself to shed at any price. From the moment that he took the plunge the Honourable Derek Ivo Moray Blount would become plain Derek Blunt. He felt he had been let down easily; but there remained the final question—how much of all this did he intend to tell his father?

He was a clumsy hand at mangling the truth. Suppose he made a valiant effort and confessed his keen wish to arrive at a more intimate knowledge of the working man's character and views? Would he ever succeed in making them understand?

His mother's fastidious sense of propriety would be outraged. His father would probably shrivel up his immature arguments with a few sarcastic remarks. Van and Ina would treat him to a mild flow of chaff. At best, they would look on him as a harmless lunatic. At worst, they would suppose him infected with the rank spirit of industrial socialism, in which case he would certainly lose his temper and with it his slender chance of a fair hearing.

No: he supposed he was a coward; but he did not feel like facing that ordeal. His adventure might seem no more to others than a mere boy's

prank ; an excuse to elude the shackles as long as he could. It meant a great deal more to him Right or wrong, the conviction grew—while he sat there smoking and dreaming late into the night—that if a fair percentage of young men in his position could be induced to spend two or three years of early manhood knocking round the world in earnest—instead of knocking about town and sampling continental cities—there might yet be some chance of restoring the natural alliance between peasant and landowner : an alliance undermined, in the eighteenth century, by callous misuse of power ; still further strained when the wedge of mutual distrust was driven in at a vulnerable point, by the Radical demagogue angling for votes ; and snapped outright in these later days, by the absentee landlord, the curse of the country.

For all his youth and his engaging touch of Oxford omniscience, Derek was no mere tyro on this vital question that England ignores or mishandles at her peril. He had been reared, not among those who prattle of " The Land " at dinner-tables or flourish it on party-platforms, but among those who live on it and for it, whether high or low. At Oxford, he had chosen the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in England for his special period of history ; and had probed deeper into his subject to gain his modest Third than Van had done to secure the Second that had so narrowly missed being a First. Unquestionably, also, he owed a good deal to his friendship with that keen and capable young land-

owner, Mark Forsyth. If he could not yet see more than a few facets of a large and many-sided subject, he had the root of the matter in him. He loved the land—pasture and arable, moor and forest and billowing downs and its sturdy inexpressive people : loved it all for its own sake, simply because it was England : for which very good reason he felt impelled, in his practical fashion, to try and enlarge his understanding and widen his point of view.

Could he have poured out to his father, naturally and simply, one half of what he thought and felt about it all, matters might have taken another and a happier turn for them both. But though the very young and the very old have some mysterious link of their own, the gulf between youth and middle age is curiously deep and wide, only to be spanned by certain rare qualities of mind and heart. Between Derek and his father was no bridge of understanding secure enough to tempt the boy across. Nor did he feel competent, as yet, to express the large, vague thoughts that were moulding his character and his whole future life. A clumsy half attempt at explaining himself would be worse than useless. His pride refused to chance the risk. He would simply state his wish to travel widely for a few years, and get a little first-hand knowledge of the Empire.

He did not look forward to that uncomfortable half-hour : but he must make out the best case he could for himself and hope to escape with a reprimand. Jack must be told of course. The good

fellow would laugh at him and quite fail to see the point. But in Jack's chaff lurked no flavour of contempt, such as Derek was perhaps too ready to suspect in the case of Van. The only close relation he could have trusted to understand was his grandmother, old Lady Avonleigh, whose open championship had been one of the brightest spots in his boyhood; and whose death, five years earlier, had been the first intense grief he had ever known. Failing her, the only person with whom he felt eager to discuss his notion was Mark, whose enthusiasm would not fail to meet him more than half way; and Derek was one of those difficult people who need to be met half-way if anything like intimacy is ever to be achieved.

A nuisance that the Forsyths were in Scotland. But October would see them back at Wynchcombe Friars—and then things would really get a move on. . . .

At this point he became aware that his pipe had gone out and that his brain was bemused with sleep too long deferred. He flung up his arms; yawned extensively and glanced with a shade less disfavour at the forbidding double bed. Now that matters were settled, he felt better satisfied with things in general than he had done for some time.

Rather odd, he reflected sleepily, as he turned up the blue gas jet to a yellow flare, that a chance meeting with Jack's sister and the mishap of his inappropriate arrival should, between them, have served to crystallize a decision so momentous to

himself, so entirely disconnected with them. The Hinges, again ! And as his head sank deep into his pillow, he wondered—still more sleepily—what fresh discoveries and failures lay in wait for him behind the door that hung upon those hinges—just temptingly ajar ?

It was characteristic of Derek that he practically counted on failure. The very word success had about it a suggestion of finality that weakened its appeal to one who was an adventurer at heart.

END OF BOOK I

## BOOK II

### Until the Harvest

#### CHAPTER I

“With what measure you mete, it shall be measured to you again.”—ST. MATTHEW.

**D**EREK'S peculiar fashion of considering his mother was, in the circumstances, very much to the point. For once in a way he had done precisely what she would have had him do; and whether the knowledge would have given him more pain or satisfaction it were hard to say. His jealousy of Van would certainly have been sharpened could he have trespassed on the privacy of her thoughts that afternoon as she drove home from her fortnightly visit to the Cottage Hospital.

Of all her duties, as great lady of the neighbourhood, she found this one the greatest bore. But she never admitted the fact, partly because it would not “look well”; partly because she was rarely honest with herself in big things or small; and she religiously kept that particular engagement some-

times at slight personal inconvenience. It was a social point of honour to keep one's engagements ; also, she believed that the " poor dears " would miss her if she failed to turn up. But to-day she had felt almost grateful to them for diverting her mind a little from this, the first serious worry that had troubled the still waters of her life since Van had frightened all Avonleigh by indulging in pneumonia on the top of influenza seven years ago. And before Van was himself again, she too had succumbed to the evil thing, that had left her a little deaf and accentuated a tendency to nervous heart trouble—just sufficiently pronounced to be very useful on occasion, without giving her family undue cause for anxiety. It had saved her from succumbing to that smelly and terrifying modern infliction—the motor, car. And now—as she rolled homeward in her victoria, with a squirrel rug tucked round her knees—there crept into her mind a hope that it might save her from the still more terrifying prospect of five years' banishment from England and Avonleigh—and Van.

Of course the appointment was flattering to Evan ; but—her plans for the winter were practically settled ; and she resented, almost as an impertinence, this volcanic intrusion of the unexpected into her daily round of pleasant, foreseen things. Really it was most inconsiderate of Lord Fareham ! For she didn't at all like the thought of Evan going without her ; but the thought of going with him she liked infinitely less.



He had not said a word about it before he started. That was so like him: leaving her to worry things out alone, with never a hint of his own wishes to help her. As a matter of fact, she felt uncomfortably certain that he would expect her to go; and she had been telling herself at intervals that she supposed she would go—when it came to the point. Even now she was still “supposing”; still holding off the inexorable moment when she could no longer sit gracefully on the fence—an attitude singularly convenient for herself and singularly irritating to the rest of her family. . . .

The prospect of twenty-four hours respite and an evening alone with Van was balm in Gilead. Rather a mercy that Derek had delayed his return: but it was very tiresome of him, all the same, not to let them know where he was or exactly when they might expect him. These little uncertainties always worried her. He knew that perfectly well. But he never troubled his head about anyone's convenience except his own. Oxford had made him selfish and had not cured him of his casual ways. He had all the faults of this graceless, restless new century that was rapidly making the world an impossible place for decent quiet people. London—social London—was already “impossible”: and even at Avonleigh, one was not altogether immune. Derek and Ina—in their utterly different fashions—brought eddies from the modern whirlpool into her land-locked harbour. Derek with his eternal how and why, his uncomfortable trick of seeing through plausible

reasons ; Ina, with her hard, eager pursuit of all that was newest in clothes and crazes and slang.

Mercifully dear Van was enough of a Barnard to have escaped the contagion. He was so well-mannered, so restful and considerate that she forgave him for telling her so little really about himself. They would talk things over to-night ; and in a decently veiled corner of her heart lurked the hope that he would fortify her own slowly gathering resolve.

On reaching home she found him in the hammock still asleep. His mouth had dropped open a little—not unbecomingly ; his half-smoked cigarette had fallen and singed a favourite Persian rug. Had Derek been the offender, her instant sensation would have been pure annoyance. As it was, she merely thought : “ Poor darling ! He *must* have been tired.” And for a few moments she stood watching him with a little, tugging ache at her heart.

It was the boy she still saw, rather than the man who—for all his affectionate ways—had been slipping insidiously out of reach for the last ten years. Asleep, his face lost the imprint of the world and regained its innocent serenity, from which purely natural phenomenon she gleaned comfort, in view of certain fitful speculations about whole tracts of his life that lay outside her ken. She liked the smooth sweep of his eyebrows ; the fastidious curve of his nostril, rather more marked than her own ; the long lines of his figure and small aristocratic

head. In effect it was the masculine projection of herself that she worshipped in the person of her sleeping son. The idea of leaving him for five years roused in her the strongest emotion of which she was capable. And Evan—who did not trouble to understand her—was probably taking it all for granted up there in Town—

The prosaic dread of damp intruded on her musings, and reluctantly she went back into the house.

The drawing-room was fragrant with the faint, sweet scent of late roses, and a footman was putting fresh logs on the fire. It was a lofty room, hung with French and English water-colours. Long windows heavily curtained looked out upon the lawn. A portrait of herself, in grey velvet and old lace, stood conspicuously near the grand piano. It was still fresh enough to give her a small shock of pleasure whenever she looked at it. But this evening her gaze dwelt on a pastel study of Van, aged ten, that hung above her inlaid bureau. She wondered how long he had been asleep out there. A dim idea that he was not strong dated from pneumonia days. Slipping into the hall, she carried off her squirrel rug and laid it cautiously over Van. After that she felt happier.

Presently, with her maid's assistance, she exchanged her dress for a silk wrapper and settled herself, as usual, in an invalid chair by the fire. As usual, she picked up a novel lying face downwards on her table; and, as usual, Powell discreetly with-

drew, switching off the dressing-table light, leaving only the shaded glow of the lamp at her mistress's elbow.

Lady Avonleigh was not an imaginative woman. But the morning's shock had galvanized into activity such imagination as she possessed; and to-night she was very much aware of the stately beauty, the comfort and sheltered peace of this home that was her bulwark against the rising tide of twentieth century unrest. If she agreed to go out with Evan, she must exchange all this for the dangers and instabilities of a long voyage; for "black servants," whom she would never trust, and snakes and insects and damp. . . .

She would never get a wink of sleep, with the uncertainty hanging over her; so Van was to be her touchstone. If he showed the slightest sign of supposing she could go, then Evan would do a good deal more than suppose; and it was not altogether without guile that she chose her gown of velvet and old lace, completing the effect with one realistic satin passion flower. Van noticed such things; and, in her heart, she wanted to please his fastidious eye; to make him feel he would miss her if she were gone.

He did notice that she had on his favourite gown; and he thought: "Poor dear! She's badly jarred. She's wearing that top-hole gown for a kind of moral support."

He had enough of the woman in him to understand very well the mysterious link between good

clothes and good courage ; but her real reason escaped him altogether.

Dinner was very much as Derek had imagined it. The setting perfect in detail, the talk negligible.

Nothing of importance could be said while the small butler and the tall footman hovered in the penumbra, like benevolent birds of prey. Jennings, the butler, suffered from an unorthodox twinkle in his blue eye, due to a lurking sense of humour, which he tried to conceal under a mask of fierceness. When he looked fiercest he was secretly most amused ; and his fierceness to-night was phenomenal. He knew perfectly well there was " something in the wind," that her ladyship was longing to " have it out with Mr. Van." But he dared not appear to hurry the sacred rite even out of consideration for her. So for half an hour she made trite remarks about the weather or mutual acquaintances ; and Van made trite remarks about the food and criticized the shooting of his friends in the North. Then the door closed for the last time and he applied the spirit lighter to his cigarette.

" Shall I stay, dear ? " she asked. Even cigarettes in the drawing-room were taboo.

Van smiled and nodded ; and they moved into armchairs by the fire.

" You're feeling pretty worried, I expect," he remarked sympathetically. " Are you hoping, *sub rosa*, that it will come to nothing ? "

He was the only one of her children who would have ventured such a remark : and she shook her

head at him with a tolerant smile of reproach.

"Father's interests must be one's first consideration."

"That's to say, you aren't violently keen yourself?"

She sighed and sipped her coffee. "Well, hardly, dear, at my age, and in my uncertain state of health. I'm a bad traveller. Entertaining isn't one of my strong points; and as far as I can gather a woman of position in India does very little else. The question is—with all these drawbacks, *would* I be any use to your father out there, or would I simply add to his worries and anxieties?"

Light began to dawn on Van.

"What does father think about it?"

"I don't know. Does one ever really get at what he thinks—about personal things?"

"It's a bit of a problem certainly. But you can't expect him to say outright that you wouldn't be much use. Perhaps he's taking it for granted you'll go."

"I'm afraid it's more likely that he hasn't yet thought about—me at all."

Van glanced at her under his eyelids. She was a woman who strictly preserved the decent reticences of home life, and she had never spoken so of his father, even to him. Their feeling for each other, if it existed, was so carefully hidden that it was difficult to imagine they had ever been lovers. Privately, Van believed they never had.

"She is badly jarred," he thought again, and the

conviction stirred his facile sympathy. But her rather pathetic remark was not easy to answer, so he maintained a tactful silence and applied himself diligently to his cigarette.

She leaned forward a little and held out one hand to the blaze. The light made pink transparencies of her long thin fingers, and the fact that they were not quite steady made them look still more fragile. Van thought: "She really isn't strong enough, and she wants me to tell her so." And her next remark confirmed him.

"How do *you* feel about it yourself, dear? I've been a little better this summer; but then—that heart attack last month—and the Bombay climate is *so* trying. Is it better to take the risk than to fail him? Or would it really be unfair on him—and you? It *is* so hard to know what's best for every one all round. Do tell me candidly what you think?"

Van was silent a moment, caressing his moustache and noting the queer upward shadows of the firelight on her face. His candid opinion was the last gift he was likely to bestow on any one—least of all on her.

"I think," he said at last, "that it's very hard on you being suddenly faced with such a big decision when you're so far from strong. Still, it would be rough on father going without you. As a Governor, he must have some sort of hostess."

"Yes. That's the difficulty," she began; and suddenly he had an idea.

“Of course there’s Aunt Marion. She knows India and she’s A.I. at that sort of thing——”

Her gasp of relief was irrepressible. Marion Blount was her husband’s favourite sister : unmarried : the very person——!

“My dear Van, how clever of you? It would take *such* a load off my mind. Aunt Marion is so capable, and they are the best of friends——”

“Perhaps father had her in his mind,” Van waxed bolder, seeing he had made a happy shot. “He probably thought things would be easier for you if he found out first about her. After all, suppose anything went seriously wrong with you, the extra worry and anxiety *would* come hard on him. But it’s for you—not for father—to say that sort of thing—isn’t it?”

“Yes, yes, of course,” she agreed with alacrity. “How stupid of me not to realize! It was very thoughtful of your father. . . . And you really do feel my going would be inadvisable—on *his* account, as well as my own.’

“Looks like it, doesn’t it? all things considered?”

He thought he might be speaking the truth; and he knew very well it was what she wanted him to say. So—being Van—he said it. That was his peculiar fashion of giving a candid opinion. He found it easy and effective, and it was one of the secrets of his popularity—which he also knew very well. To-night it gave him particular satisfaction; for he was fond of his mother and, on the whole, he would rather she stayed at home.



She had risen now and laid a light hand on his hair. "What a comfort you are, Van," she said softly. "I knew things would come straight if I could talk them out with you."

And Van thought: "Lucky old Derek went off in a huff. He would have been most infernally in the way."

Later on, he played to her a little. He had a sympathetic touch and picked up light music easily by ear. And she pretended to read the Court Circular column, because it wouldn't do to let him guess the immensity of her relief.

Yet she had once honestly cared for her husband ; and in her colourless fashion, she still cared for him enough to wish—quite perversely—that he should need her a little more than he appeared to do. No doubt Van was right. He probably had Marion in his mind ; he would prefer Marion. And she had made herself miserable for nothing. So, instinctively, she drew fresh worries even from the well-spring of her relief.

As a matter of fact she would have found life distinctly dull without her tame menagerie of minor frets and grievances. But she drew the line at major ones ; and it was distinctly a major one that they none of them really seemed to want her—not even Van. He had not said he would mind her going or that he was glad of her decision. No one seemed to suppose she needed that sort of thing ; yet in secret she hungered for it, and never dreamed that she was simply reaping as she had sown.

It was the same with her husband. She had let him gradually drift away from her without raising a finger to avert the calamity: and there were moments—as to-night—when she felt with a sudden pang how lonely she was behind the rampart of her dignity and decent reticences and the “Morning Post.” It did not strike her that Evan might sometimes feel lonely too. He had his intellectual interests, his own menagerie of worries, which he no longer shared with her. True, it was her misfortune that she could not mentally keep pace with him or her sons. But she had to pay the price of disability, which is often quite as heavy as the price of sin.

She had lost Derek on the day that he asked for bread and received a stone. Ina, she could scarcely be said to have found at all. Even in nursery days her only daughter had been a hard little separate entity; a creature who put forth no tendrils: in effect, a shallow miniature edition of her father. So, where Lady Avonleigh might have succeeded, small chance had been given her. And even with her adored Van she had never established anything like real confidence or intimacy.

In her very hidden heart she was mortally envious of Lady Forsyth, to whom she gave no credit for the fact she was obviously a friend, as well as a mother, to her sons. Instead, she wondered, disconsolately, what was wrong with her own boys that they should be so different?

It was not in her to perceive the difference between mother love and mere maternal instinct that wears

thinner with each year. For she did not know—and now would never learn—that all progressive love, like progressive life, is by death; that the divine dictum “man must die to live,” is no arbitrary decree, but a fundamental law of all life and growth.

Only now and again she felt oppressed by a vague consciousness of failure all round in her home relations; and the woman who fails in these is in as deplorable a case as a man who fails in his profession.

After Van had finished playing they talked fitfully of trivial things. But his good-night kiss when she rose—on the stroke of ten—was less perfunctory than usual.

“Buck up, dear, and don’t worry,” he said kindly. “Father would be the last person to let you run any risks. If Aunt Marion goes with him, you’ll both be satisfied.”

“And—you?” she ventured, a hand on his arm.

His smile was half tender, half amused. “Well naturally—the answer is in the affirmative!”

And with that she had to rest content.

## CHAPTER II

“ Les drames de la vie ne sont pas dans les circonstances. Ils sont dans le coeur.”—BALZAC.

LORD AVONLEIGH'S return next day put an end to any lurking hope that the whole thing might fall through. He arrived early in the afternoon: a wiry man of middle height, with thin lips and clear keen eyes under Derek's eave-like brows. The strongly modelled nose and chin jutted also to correspond. It was the face of a man vigorous in action, withdrawn in spirit. The eyes under their cavernous eye-bones had a hawk-like gleam: and in anger or argument his brain had a hawk-like swoop, very disconcerting to the victim of the moment. With a man of the world's outlook and knowledge he combined the hidden idealism of the Englishman and the mental fibre of the Scot: a fine if formidable trinity. And it would be hard to say whether his uncompromising rectitude or his sardonic humour made him the more difficult to live with.

“ Yes, I'm going. It's all fixed up,” he announced, answering the question that hovered in his wife's eyes, when at last they were alone in the drawing-room.

There was a moment of silence while he stood upon the hearth-rug, letting his glance wander from object to object, giving his announcement time to soak in. Then, turning to Van, he recounted the gist of his long talk with Lord Wyntoun, who had made it quite clear to him that the Bombay appointment, in the present state of affairs, would be no bed of roses. In fact if the Government didn't take a firmer stand shortly, they would have the fat in the fire.

Van listened patiently, with his admirable air of polite interest: and Lady Avonleigh sat silent, waiting for something more personal to emerge from all this irrelevance. That was what made Evan so distracting. He would talk by the yard about things that nobody wanted to hear: yet if one questioned him about really important details, one would be extinguished on the spot. She could say nothing, of course, while Van was there; but with the appearance of the tea-tray he tactfully effaced himself, catching her eye as he went.

She thought, with a glow of pride, "How perfectly he does these little things!" And, after all, skill in just those little things goes far to make the livableness of life.

Lord Avonleigh further delayed matters by asking for a whisky and soda instead of tea.

Not till he had poured it out and settled himself in his deep chair did she launch the tremendous question:

"Evan—how soon?"

"Well, as soon as possible. Fareham's in a bad

way ; and I would like to be on the spot when he sails. I said—three weeks. Personally, I could manage it sooner, but I knew you'd want time to turn round."

She stifled a faint gasp of dismay. He heard it and gave her one of his quick looks.

"I don't want to hustle you, my dear. Isn't three weeks long enough to collect the indispensable clothes and medicines and patent preventives?"

Van was wrong, hopelessly wrong. But how could she slip gracefully off the fence if Evan was going to talk like that? Her heart was jerking unevenly and her hands were cold. If he would only see!

But he was looking at the picture of Van over her bureau, and he did not even seem to notice the gap of silence between his question and her tentative reply.

"It isn't the shopping and the packing that upsets one. It's the whole idea—the wrench——"

"Of course it's a wrench." This time he did not look at her. "I never thought *I* should leave the old place again for any length of time. And I don't half like it—for many reasons. But Wyntoun rubbed it into me that I'm the man they want out there now. It's a compliment one appreciates. And the money wouldn't come amiss."

"But, Evan—the climate——" she began.

"*And* the mosquitoes and the white ants!" he took her up with his baffling half-smile. "It's possible we may survive them all in Government House. The complete change will do you no end of

good. Enlarge your mind all round. Bombay's a vastly interesting place, Esther. Indian women there, worth knowing, as well as our own people. Marion envies you. She'll help you all she can. I told her to come along down to-morrow and get you going. Rather a good idea if she went out with us for the cold weather. She could put you in the way of things——"

He broke off with a start, for his wife's tea-spoon clattered violently against her cup, and her hand shook so that the cup overturned, sending a cascade of hot tea into her lap. Any kind of awkwardness was so unlike her that Lord Avonleigh was taken aback.

"My *dear* Esther!" he exclaimed: and before her shaking fingers could find a handkerchief he had produced his own and was kneeling on the hearth-rug dabbing her skirt.

"Very clumsy of me," she murmured.

"But you're never clumsy," he said. "And you're shaking like a leaf."

His searching look drew the unwilling blood into her cheeks; and before she could speak the words, so carefully planned in advance, she knew there was no need for them.

"I—see," he said slowly in a changed, hard voice. "You don't intend to go. I was making things awkward for you—I apologize."

He had risen from his knees—carefully because of rheumatism; and he stood there, looking down at her with what Derek called his "shut-up face."

Sheer relief that the truth was out helped her to regain her lost control.

"No, Evan," she protested. "You don't really see. It's not a case of 'intending.'"

"It never is—when we follow our own desires."

He saw her wince without compunction. He could be unmerciful when hurt or angered; and at the moment he was both.

She drew herself up, stung by his tone.

"You are unfair—and unkind. I suppose you won't believe—now—that I've been worrying myself to death to know which way would be best—for you." (In the misery and confusion of the moment she imagined she was speaking the truth.) "It's not as if I were a young woman in robust health. You know perfectly well——"

"I know perfectly well," he said, with his deadly quietness, "that your many ailments—real and fanciful—have never yet hindered you from doing what you are keen about."

"You imply that I am that detestable thing—a *malade imaginaire*?"

"I don't deal in implications. The truth is that when a disagreeable duty comes your way, you work yourself up till you really *are* ill—or very near it. Look—you're shaking still. Have another cup of tea and don't bother any more about Bombay. I can take Marion. She'll jump at the offer. But I naturally thought you might like to come—if only for part of the time."



His reasonableness pricked her to sudden penitence.

"Of course I would, Evan, in some ways; but——"

He silenced her with a gesture, and pointed at her disfigured skirt.

"*That* is your real answer. A woman never knows when she has said enough. Now get on with your tea."

Her hand had so pathetic a tremor that he quietly took the teapot from her and filled the cup himself, adding milk and sugar exactly to her taste. Van could not have done it better. It was these apparent contradictions in her husband that so often puzzled her and sometimes shamed her—as now. He would stab her with his tongue under provocation, and a few minutes later salve the wound he had made with some quietly courteous action.

"There—the worst's over. I'm not going to drag you out by the hair of your head." He gravely handed her a plate of sandwiches, then sat down as before, and emptied his tumbler. "Will you allow me one cigarette?"

"Of course."

"Thanks. I'm tired."

He leaned back and stretched out his legs, regarding her with his odd half-smile—whimsical, inscrutable. "*I've* a good few problems to worry over, too. Things started here and there on the estate, and I shan't be able to see them through. Also there are my household appointments to make—out there.

Naturally I should like Van for my Private Secretary. He's had good training, and he'd be useful in the social line. I thought you two would work well together."

She put down her tea-cup rather suddenly.

"Are you going . . . to take him?" she asked in a toneless voice, carefully controlled.

"I should like to, of course. It would be a comfort to have *one* member of my family with me."

He knew quite well that she was on thorns; perhaps regretting her own withdrawal. But all things considered, he felt she deserved it. He even took a wicked pleasure in balancing the pros and cons.

"That would mean—shutting up Avonleigh?" Her question was addressed to the middle button of his waistcoat.

"Yes. Or letting it. That's one of the drawbacks."

"Rather a big one, isn't it?"

"M'yes. But would Van care to live here in any case?"

"Would he care to spend five years out of England?" she countered, desperate, but controlled.

"You mean—you wouldn't care about it," he corrected her with perfect suavity.

"I said 'Van,' Evan."

He discerned a faint challenge in her tone, and his thin lips twitched under his moustache.

"It's six of Van and half a dozen of you as far as India goes. The Empire means precious little to either of you. It's my one real quarrel with Van."

Five years of Bombay would be a liberal education for you both. But you needn't be afraid. (You were—mortally—three minutes ago.) He'd vote for London and Avonleigh if I put it to him. But I'm not going to put it to him."

He saw relief flow through her like a warm cordial. The fingers that grasped an arm of her chair slackened, and she helped herself to another sandwich. Watching her under his lids, he thought: "Poor Esther! She was hard hit. But she can stand up to it—*when* she chooses."

Aloud he said: "However, if he stays at home, he must put his back into looking after Avonleigh. I shall give him special powers. Make him fully responsible for things. He's hardly had enough of that so far. Malcolm's invaluable; but still—much as I should enjoy having the boy with me, I think it's advisable that one of us should remain on the spot."

"Yes, I do think that's a very important consideration," she agreed, with guarded alacrity; and he smiled at the toes of his out-stretched boots.

"Also—a very convenient one. But I'm glad we're agreed on one point at least!"

Soon after that he left her; and as the door closed behind him she leaned back in her chair, exhausted with the strain of it all, yet immeasurably relieved.

Twenty minutes later he was in the saddle—the finest arm-chair in the world; his London attire exchanged for rough tweeds, leggings and a faded felt hat: a very old friend to which he clung obstin-

ately in spite of fitful remonstrances from his wife.

He had decided, on impulse, to ride over to Ashbourne and see what progress they were making with his new model almshouses. Would he ever see them completed?

The crisp, clean September air, the rhythmic movement and the restful companionship of the sensitive creature he rode, magically removed all trace of weariness from his body and brain. The jar of his wife's defection had made him unpleasantly aware that the last two days had been more of a strain than they had any business to be for a man in the prime of life—and health. He would have given much to feel quite at ease about that last. It was his confirmed opinion—shared by many strong men—that doctors were mostly fools. But they could be very disquieting fools—on occasion; as he had discovered yesterday afternoon. It would never do, though, for a man to let himself be hamstrung by the cryptic stuff they were paid to talk. The poor devils had to earn their livelihood; and no doubt their mysterious air of being in the confidence of the Almighty impressed the women. Lord Avonleigh's private conviction was that he had been robbed of three guineas, in all good faith, by an honest but deluded physician. Wiry and virile, he had reached the meridian of life with nothing worse than an accident or two, and a solitary illness to mar his clean bill of health. Only during the last few years rheumatism had laid stealthy hands upon him; and sensations of pain and heaviness, where

none should be, warned him intermittently that vital parts of the little-regarded inner machinery were out of gear.

At first this had made him nervous and uncomfortable, as healthy men are apt to become at the first whisper of disease. But he had despised himself and had lived the thing down. One invalid in the family was trouble enough; and Esther had established a monopoly in that line. Once or twice he had spoken to her casually on the subject, and threatened to trespass on her preserves. Farrar, the family doctor, had spoken also—far from casually—for the which liberty Lord Avonleigh had never forgiven him.

Remembering these things, he found himself wondering . . . had it even occurred to Esther that, of the two, he had the more reason to shrink from five years of Bombay, plus hard work and heavy responsibility. In the light of her refusal to accompany him, he saw her wifely concern of yesterday morning, and her talk about avoiding risks, as no more than a tactful indication that she, at least, would be wise enough to avoid anything of the kind. Possibly he wronged her. And very certainly he was a fool to have expected anything else. But he had returned home tired, acutely aware of the coming wrench; and being only human, he had hoped, in the teeth of experience, for the support of her wifely approval. He had hoped to enlist her interest by talking things out more fully than was his wont. But the very manner of her greeting had jarred;

and before he could make any real headway the truth was out : all his hardness and bitterness up in arms.

After twenty-eight years of life with her, he might have known—— !

Always, at difficult corners, when the real man in him had reached out to the real woman in her, she had most signally failed him : and she never seemed to be aware of the fact. Therein lay the tragedy— for herself and for him.

It cannot be said that Lord Avonleigh's dependence upon any human being was easily discernible. There ran through his whole nature an aloof, impersonal streak, which he had passed on, in a measure, to his second son : yet under the surface, in both, the natural need was there. Other women had discerned it—which did not exactly meet the case. But Esther Avonleigh—a mild, unaggressive egoist— had small gift for reading between the lines. For all that, he did not doubt her affection—or his own. Though love, as an active emotion, could scarcely, now, be said to exist between them, it had once been there. At seven-and-twenty how arrogantly certain he had been of his own heart and his own wisdom ! How hotly he had resented his mother's opposition which had unconsciously precipitated the very crisis she sought to prevent. Now, in his hardly earned wisdom, he wondered whether a good few mistaken marriages were not so made ?

But he was not addicted to futile burrowings into the past. The present demanded his utmost atten-

tion, his utmost energy ; and the necessity for speeding-up all round made him feel mentally younger ; braced him to spurn unauthorized aches and pains.

His dinner with Wyntoun had fairly extinguished that deluded specialist. The two men were at once old friends and old political adversaries ; and of late years they had drifted apart. While Lord Wyntoun had been drawn deeper into the political ferment, Lord Avonleigh had retired from an atmosphere of barren controversy and intrigue, thoroughly uncongenial to him as a patriot and a man. He could not bring himself either to idealize " politics of the pavement," or, for the sake of preferment, to profess a faith that was not in him.

" I don't disbelieve in the people—far from it," he had written to Wyntoun, in justification of his attitude. " I merely maintain that the whole people, and nothing but the people, spells national collapse. Crowd mentality and crowd morality—what are they, but mind and morals reduced to their lowest common measure ? And democracy rampant is crowd morality in excelsis ; the apotheosis of officialdom and inefficiency. I regard it as a fever from which the real England may yet recover—in due time."

Naturally Wyntoun disagreed with him, and liked him none the less for that.

Meantime, while the fever raged, Lord Avonleigh quietly stood aside and devoted himself, in his practical unsentimental fashion, to the interests of his

own share of England's population on both estates. He seldom used his seat in the upper House these days, and still more seldom spoke, except on Imperial affairs or to plead the unpopular cause of "the Land"—the whole land, forest, field and pasture—a subject he had made peculiarly his own. The same impersonal streak that isolated him in his home had kept him independent of party shackles and party claims; with the natural result that he was respected in both camps; popular in neither. He believed in the British Empire; he was admittedly sound on social reform; and his worst enemies could not impugn his integrity, his sanity, or his breadth of view.

Hence Lord Wyntoun's bolt from the blue. He could have paid his friend no higher compliment, of which that same friend was very well aware.

Nevertheless he could not pretend to relish the prospect of five years' banishment from Avonleigh and his wife and Van. When he had denied himself the pleasure of Van's company—or was it the pain of Van's refusal?—he had counted on Esther. Well, perhaps they could be induced to come out together one winter, just to look him up. At least he could rely on Marion, who would unquestionably be more capable than Esther as helpmate and hostess at Government House. He had a very real affection for his only sister and a pleasant remembrance of their tour through India shortly after his mother's death; a tour that had been more than a mere orgy of scenery and ancient cities and big game. By keep-



ing his wits alert, he had perceived much and inferred more. He had made several distinguished acquaintances of both races and had kept in close touch with the country ever since.

Even in those days, when distrust was heresy, he had deeply distrusted German missionaries, German traders, and exalted German travellers in search of sport. He distrusted them still. He knew that affairs out there were more critical than the India Office cared to admit ; that he would have to curb his incisive tongue and walk warily like a cat among bits of broken glass. And the knowledge stimulated him. He rose to a difficult occasion, like a thoroughbred to a five-barred gate ; and if he must leave Avonleigh, he liked nothing better than administrative work. He had enjoyed his fair share of it in Bermuda and New South Wales ; and he was fortunate—under a Radical regime—to get another chance. He could pull through the five years with reasonable care ; and when they were over, he would relish more than ever the abiding charm of this his own corner of England that was like a part of himself ; dearer to him almost than any living being except the son for whom he held it in trust. . . .

He spent a satisfactory half-hour in going over his model almshouses and having a talk with the foreman, a clever opiated fellow, who privately commended "his lordship" for taking a direct personal interest in such things. Then, a little before sunset, he cantered homeward through the

mellow stillness that brooded like an enchantment on moor and wood and field.

Before him loomed the pine-clad curve of Burnt Hill, fretting the gold like the teeth of a saw. On either side of him was open country, and in the flood of level light solitary trees seemed to stand spell-bound, holding their breath. In shadowy coppices they huddled together like conspirators awaiting the given moment. Unshadowed fields opened their hearts to the splendour and the silence; for there was no sound anywhere but the rhythm of Royal's hoof-beats and the occasional flutter of an unseen bird. The whole earth was saturated with peace. Qualms and anxieties were mysteriously spirited away. . . .

Nearing the great gates, he spied another solitary figure ahead of him on the road: a figure with square-set shoulders, swinging along at a steady pace. For a while he watched it abstractedly with the wistful envy of middle age for the boundless energy of youth. Then recognition flashed on him. It was Derek.

Where on earth had he sprung from? Had Esther, in her perturbation, forgotten to mention his return? Or had he just dropped out of the blue, in his casual fashion, without a word? "Far more likely," he reflected, gazing with an odd mixture of tenderness and disapproval at his unconscious son.

And suddenly he had an inspiration—Why not Derek?

He recognized it, almost at once, as a counsel of

despair. Derek was too young, too unsocial, too little amenable. Still, he clung to the idea. He felt a secret reluctance—which would never have been suspected by his family—to face five years' banishment unaccompanied by son, daughter, or wife. And he slackened speed to debate the matter with himself.

After all, Derek had brains and character, and a wider range of interests than Van. He might very well develop into a capable Private Secretary. But—what would he himself have to say to it?

Lord Avonleigh admitted that he had not the ghost of an idea. And the admission brought home to him, with unpleasant force, how little trouble he had taken to make the acquaintance of his own son. Well—here at any rate was a chance of getting to close quarters with the boy. Whether anything would come of it only Derek could decide.

Lord Avonleigh gave the reins a shake and trotted briskly towards that unknown human quantity—his second son.

### CHAPTER III

"But we are cumbered with our egotisms ;  
A thousand prisms,  
Hung round our souls, refract the single ray  
That else would show us instantly the way."

T. E. BROWN.

AT the sound of hoofs behind him, Derek swung round, smiled in his sudden friendly fashion, and stood waiting for his father to come up with him.

"Confound me!" thought the Viscount, "I never even noticed what an engaging smile the fellow has." As a matter of fact he had noticed it casually a score of times: but it had made no impression on the true register of memory—his heart.

"Hullo!" he said, dismounting and slipping an arm through Royal's bridle, "where have you dropped from?"

"Ashbourne," answered Derek. "I got so used to walking out there. Thought I'd finish up with a tramp."

"Does Mother know you're back?"

"I hope so. I wrote yesterday."

"That's all right. Had a good time?"

"A ripping time. Suits me—that sort of thing."

Lord Avonleigh glanced approvingly at his sunburnt face. "You look fit enough," he said. "I'm only just back from town. And Mother didn't happen to mention about you at tea-time. We had important matters to discuss." A pause. "Derek—Lord Wyntoun has offered me the Governorship of Bombay."

Derek's pre-arranged start came off fairly well. "Bombay!" he echoed. "Are you going?"

"Yes. In a few weeks."

This time Derek's surprise was unfeigned. "I say! That's sharp work. I can hardly believe it.—Mother too?"

"No. Mother is not strong enough. She will be better—safer in England."

"Rather hard lines—on both of you."

There was tentative sympathy in Derek's tone. He wanted to say more; but he had always a vague, uncomfortable sense of repression in his father's company. To-day the atmosphere seemed friendlier than usual; and, with his own confession in view, he would have liked to make the most of it. But they were tied and bound by the chains of their disabilities. The bridge Lord Avonleigh had neglected to build could not be improvised at will. Just because the unexpected note of sympathy struck home, he found himself unable to answer his son's remark; and they walked on in silence through the great iron gates.

"Let me," Derek said and put out a hand for Royal's rein.

Lord Avonleigh smiled. "Thanks, old boy. But he prefers it this way. *He'll* go out with me, if no one else does. I believe he'd fret if I left him. Animals are more given that way than—their superiors."

Something in his tone urged Derek to venture a personal question. "Father—are you keen to go?"

There was a perceptible silence. "It is a very great opportunity and—a great compliment," Lord Avonleigh answered in his dry, detached voice that made Derek fear he had been guilty of clumsy intrusion. "The situation out there is ticklish—therefore interesting. India is being unwisely hustled along the fatal path of democracy: in her case, peculiarly fatal. That spells trouble for us and worse trouble for her. I haven't the arrogance to suppose I can prevent her Immoderates from running violently down a steep place: but at least one may be able to apply the brake. If Wyntoun thinks I'm qualified, it's worth having a try."

"Rather. I don't wonder you're keen." But he did wonder that his father should have vouchsafed him such an exhaustive answer to a personal question.

Lord Avonleigh walked on a few paces; then: "How would you like to come out with me and have a hand in it, too?" he asked with one of his direct looks. "I could take you as my Private Secretary. Interesting work. You'd soon get the hang of it."

To say that Derek was taken aback is to give a shadowy idea of his sensations. He was more than

amazed. He was deeply moved. One clear thought smote through his confusion: "If only it had been yesterday!" Refusal seemed so ungracious, that he would have been tempted to accept and chance it—yesterday.

To-day—with the Great Experiment looming ahead—his slow, tenacious brain could not suddenly swing round to the opposite pole; neither could he forfeit in a flash those few extra years of independence, and his whole underlying idea.

It seemed to him—and to his father—an age before he found his tongue.

"Of course—I'd love to go with you; and to see something of India," he began in a voice that tried to be natural. "But—I'm afraid I'd be precious little use—in any capacity. I should have thought . . . Van. . . ."

"His qualifications go without saying." Lord Avonleigh's tone had hardened. He felt refusal in the air. "Unfortunately for me, it is not advisable that we should both be away from Avonleigh for so long on end."

Derek thought: "That accounts for it. I'm *faute de mieux*. I'd never satisfy him if I tried ever so."

And his father thought: "He's just as bad as the others. Only considers himself." Aloud he said: "If I'm satisfied—where's the objection? You've been hawering long enough; and I gather that my proposal—broadly speaking—is not distasteful to you."

"Of course not. But—it's the last thing I'd have dreamed of. Besides——"

His painful hesitation was so evident that Lord Avonleigh struck in: "My dear boy, don't feel bound to put yourself out purely as a favour to me."

It was not sarcastically meant; but long habit made Derek take it so. He reddened furiously.

"It's not likely I'd think of it that way," he said, goaded to frankness by pain and smothered temper. "Hasn't my brilliant talent for muddling things been pretty well rubbed into me—by all of you, ever since I was old enough to muddle anything? Is it surprising I should hesitate?"

"Altogether on my account?" The edge had gone from Lord Avonleigh's tone.

"No—not altogether," said truthful Derek, only half mollified. "I've got a notion of my own. You told me I'd better arrive at some conclusion this vac."

"And you have done so? I admit—I didn't expect it."

"*There* you are!" muttered Derek and checked himself. "But—you won't approve. So—in a way, you're right."

Lord Avonleigh glanced at the boy under his eyelids. He had never felt more strongly drawn to his younger son than at that moment. But he had never been affectionate with his boys; and Derek's pride was obviously up in arms.

"Am I to be allowed to hear the conclusion I shall not approve of?" he asked more gently; and



his gentleness sounded to Derek like mock humility.

"I'm afraid I can't make things very clear, but—it's like this. I've crammed in a fair amount of book learning at Oxford. What I want now is—to get at facts—life. Not mere brain stuff; but the bedrock things . . . that you sort of absorb through the pores of your skin." He hesitated and bit his lip. "That sounds like moonshine. I'm rotten at explaining. What I mean is that books are all very well—up to a point. But . . . it seems to me you can only get at men by knocking round the earth——" He broke off, painfully aware that his defence sounded lame and impotent without the deeper, incommunicable reasons hidden in his heart.

Lord Avonleigh's smile had the exasperating sapience of middle age that seems to say—"I've been taken that way too. Mere intellectual measles and whooping-cough." What he actually said was: "That's all right in theory, Derek. In practice it too often spells coming a cropper——"

"Well—you can learn a lot from coming a cropper, if you've the grit to pick yourself up and go on again."

The sapient smile deepened. "Rather a costly form of education, seeing we are only given one life to learn with. Do you happen to have been studying 'The Apology for Idlers?'"

That gentle flick killed any impulse to further confidence. "You evidently don't understand, Father," Derek said with a touch of hauteur. "Idling isn't part of my programme at all."

"If you would favour me with a few items of your programme you might find me less thickheaded. What part of the earth do you propose to knock round in and absorb things through the pores of your skin?"

"Australia—Canada, and the rest. I want to know a bit more about the Empire at first hand."

"Quite a laudable ambition. What's the ultimate objective? Parliament and four hundred a year?"

"I hadn't thought of that. I'd like it well enough, though, if I saw the remotest chance of getting at the real thing. But they all seem too busy, these days, throwing mud at each other for the country to have much of a look in."

"The country, my dear Derek, is like a sick giant suffering from a plethora of doctors and an orgy of experiment. It may yet come to life again and kick them all to blazes."

"But you must experiment a bit if you want progress——"

Lord Avonleigh's quick brain pounced on a hidden connexion. "Experiment is like salt," he said. "It needs to be used sparingly, or it ruins the whole dish. By the same token, I hope you don't contemplate an orgy of that kind on the strength of a decent allowance?"

Again he saw the boy redden through his sunburn. "Of course not. You might give me credit. . . . It's simply what I said. I want to get at things—first-

hand." He hesitated, then plunged—"To get outside the artificial limits of my own caste——"

"My good boy, you can't get outside those limits anywhere, unless you propose to shed your skin——"

"That's just what I won't admit," Derek began with a touch of heat: then checked himself and was silent.

His father was silent also; curious, half amused and wholly interested; awaiting further enlightenment. But the silence held, as they walked on up the noble sweep of the drive; and he perceived, with a stab of disappointment, that the boy—while talking "moonshine"—evidently had some clear plan in his head which he could not or would not reveal. Nor was he, himself, the man to press for his son's confidence. Since he had not troubled to win it, he could not now, at the eleventh hour, force the shy and hidden thing. But at least he had a right to certain guarantees.

"Limits are tricky things even when they seem artificial," he remarked after due deliberation, "the temptation to disregard them comes to most men of character—some time. But they have an awkward knack of rounding on you in the end. Modern art ignores them. Consider the disastrous result!—Do you propose to disregard the artificial limit of time?"

"Of course not. I'm not quite such a fool as I seem to sound."

"I haven't said so, Derek, and I certainly haven't thought so. You sound rather mysterious and

sketchy—that's all. How long do you give yourself ? ”

“ How long will you give me ? ” Derek countered, smiling frankly now and speaking with less constraint. “ I'd like three years—till I'm twenty-five. Perhaps less. But not more. And—if you suspect it's a sort of glorified slack I'm after, well ”—a portentous pause—“ you can stop my allowance.”

“ My dear chap—don't be a fool ! ” Lord Avonleigh said gruffly ; and Derek preferred the gruffness to his silky sarcasms because it suggested deeper feeling. He had seen in a flash that here was the most he could offer in the way of credentials and had the satisfaction of knowing that his stroke had taken effect. He was also distinctly relieved.

“ I meant it, though,” he said quietly. “ Thanks very much all the same for giving me that extent of rope——”

“ To hang yourself with ? ”

Their eyes met in a half defiant friendliness.

“ I hope it won't come to that ! I'll try not to make an unholy mess of things. And whatever kind of fool I may be—I won't forget . . . where I belong.”

The last words came out hurriedly, almost casually, and his father—who quite understood—answered him in the same vein. “ That's to say you *will* respect the limits—if it comes to a pinch. I thought as much ! When do you intend to start ? ”

“ Not till *you're* out of England.”

The emphasis on the pronoun atoned for a good deal. They were nearing the house by now—and Lord Avonleigh left it at that.

The magical peace of evening that had calmed his troubled spirit was gone. But Derek, in his own fashion, had salved the wound made by his frank refusal, and in the process had thrust upon Lord Avonleigh the home truth that he had culpably overlooked his younger son. Being a just man, he recognized that this afternoon's disappointment was the logical outcome of his own aloofness; and that the mere fact of fatherhood gave him no right of entry into the deeper places of his children's thoughts. God Himself knocks at that door.

But while Derek's obstinate reticence pricked his curiosity, he secretly approved the boy's independent spirit and distaste for the sheep-track.

He was standing before his dressing-table while these thoughts strayed through his brain.

"Damned carelessness on my part," he reflected, adjusting, with perfect precision, the set of his tie. "There's excuse for Esther. They haven't a thing in common. There's none for me. He's turning out more than ever like the dear old lady. She always said there was good stuff in him." And the dear old lady had a knack of being in the right. It was one of her most aggravating qualities.

At dinner Derek had less to say for himself than usual; while Esther, poor dear, was doing her

ineffectual best to hide under a bushel of small talk the glow of her secret relief. It was Van's facile tongue that filled the gaps.

As "a mere night-light of the Foreign Office" he could not pretend to more than a surface acquaintance with Indian affairs; but he had a knack of using his half-knowledge with excellent effect. He also possessed the gift of "drawing out" his reticent father; a genuine achievement that gave almost equal satisfaction to them both, and possibly explained Lord Avonleigh's apparent blindness to the failings of his elder son.

To-night when India was disposed of, they "talked pavement" as Derek put it—to their mutual entertainment; gossip of dinner tables, the Lobby and the Clubs. Every big brain has its foible; and Lord Avonleigh's satirical humour made him relish any incident of the human comedy that threw a flashlight on the frailties, delinquencies or follies of his kind. And Van had a positive flair for stories that would tickle his father's palate; discreet stories for the dinner-table that his lady mother could enjoy without turning a hair; indiscreet stories, of a racy flavour, to enliven their half-hour over wine and cigars. This minor link between them had often stood him in good stead. Minor links play a major part in oiling the wheels of life.

To-night, when the three men had enjoyed their moderate fill, Lord Avonleigh took Van lightly by the arm.

"Come to the library," he said. "We must talk

business now. Tell Mother we'll turn up later for bridge, Derek. You can amuse her meantime with your Tyrolese escapades."

Derek grimaced. "I'm afraid there weren't any worth jawing about."

"What—not the ghost of an indiscretion? Not one complaisant *mädchen* among them all?"

Derek reddened and looked uncomfortable. He was helpless before personal chaff. "Well, of course we played the fool a bit" . . . he muttered; and Van came timely to his aid.

"Poor old Dirks! A shame to pull his respectable leg. He hates it like the devil. He took out an infant in arms and they had a top-hole tea-party on strictly irrefragable lines."

"Jack Burlton, eh?"

"Yes—Jack the Ripper." And the two went off together.

When Derek entered the drawing-room his mother laid aside her paper and looked up with her polite smile of welcome. He caught himself wishing that there was less of the politeness and more of the welcome. She was still "new" enough to make him feel acutely the lack of any real response.

"You look remarkably well," she said, when he had delivered his message. "And there must be plenty to tell me. You've been away such ages. Three months, is it?"

"Very nearly."

"You don't bestow much of your long vac. on Avonleigh," she said quite pleasantly; but it was

not the sort of remark to stimulate conversation.

"No loss for Avonleigh!" he retorted with a quick look that recalled his father. "And it's one's only chance for a good walking tour."

"Well—and was it a great success?" She picked up a green silk tie she was knitting for Van and resigned herself to details.

"Yes. It was ripping," Derek remarked staring at the fire. "Grand scenery. The finest I've ever struck. And we were in luck with our weather."

"A very important point," she murmured with conviction. "It's the damp that makes that sort of thing so risky. I can't quite see, myself, where the pleasure comes in. I hope you took your Burberry?"

"We had an old one of Jack's between us," Derek informed her gravely. "It came in quite handy once—on a blazing hot day."

Lady Avonleigh looked vaguely perplexed. Derek had his father's annoying trick of saying nonsensical things with an unmoved face, so that you never knew whether you were expected to smile or not. She supposed she had misheard him and went on with her catechism.

"Were you simply walking all the time?"

"Most of the time—when we weren't sleeping or eating."

"It doesn't sound very amusing—or very edifying."

"Oh, but it *was*—hugely edifying. And no end of a lark."



He did not volunteer concrete proofs of either statement; and she went on patiently with her knitting, though she was longing to finish the account of a fashionable wedding that lay at her elbow.

Derek—discouraged by her silence—was craving for a pipe. He had been smoking inordinately of late. The longer the pause lasted, the harder he found it to start afresh. Every remark that occurred to him seemed more inane than the last. And to sit there dumb, staring into the fire, made him feel a perfect fool. There were many little things he would like to tell her, if she would only give the slightest sign of caring to hear them. Also he wanted to express his sympathy that she could not go with his father; but felt too uncertain about her real wishes in the matter to venture on such delicate ground. It was significant of their whole relation that he did not think of mentioning his father's offer or his own decision to leave England.

Why did her mere presence hang a dead weight on him so that he could not be his natural self? Was it his own incurable keenness to see her again that made the actuality so flat by contrast?

And yet—she looked so charming, so dignified, sitting there in her velvet gown, with the rose-shaded light falling on her smooth hair and her long fingers moving rhythmically to and fro. She was always knitting ties for Van. The only one she ever made for him he had worn devoutly till it became a faded unsightly rag. And even then he had not thrown it away. It reposed in his tie case still.

Absorbed in these thoughts, he forgot his futile hunt for the right remark. A very small sound, the ghost of a sigh, reminded him that the silence had lasted an age—about five minutes by the clock. Then just as a happy idea struck him he saw her glance wistfully at her discarded paper: and the sight tripped him up altogether. He thought: "Poor dear! She's deadly bored. Longing to read." And to give her a chance he began turning over the leaves of a book that lay on a small table near him.

At that she laid down her work and regarded him with mild exasperation.

"Really, Derek!" she said. "Have you *quite* lost your manners? Here am I, waiting to hear some more. And after a few stupid remarks about the scenery and the weather, you start reading a book. As you say you enjoyed yourself, you might be a little more explicit for the benefit of others."

The injustice of it all—though quite unwitting—goaded Derek into some show of self-defence. "Well, of course I will be, if you really care to hear. Most people would pay to be let off. I was afraid if I began to spread myself, you'd be bored stiff and be too polite to show it. And just now . . . the way you looked at the paper . . . I felt I was simply being a nuisance. So I took up this beastly book. Honour bright, I don't know what it's about—and I don't care a damn!"

"Derek! In my drawing-room!"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot. I do seem to have

dropped my manners somewhere on the Brenner Pass! But if you *want* to read, Mother, why play at politeness?"

"I *don't* want to read." Having arraigned him, she mendaciously stuck to her guns. "It was only—Lady Mary Rose's wedding. And I'd like to hear a little more about your doings before they come in."

"All right," he said, and proceeded to do his halting best.

For half an hour or so things went swimmingly. Derek, feeling less constrained, warmed to his subject; and if her comments flagged a little, he scarcely noticed it. He was well launched on their crowning tramp over the Brenner Pass when, by unlucky chance, he detected her gracefully screening a yawn. That tripped him up again and brought the great tramp rather abruptly to an end. But he managed it well enough to escape counter-detection. Then he rose and went over to the fire.

"I'm sure you've had enough of me and my doings," he said casually. "You'd much better go back to your wedding presents!"

She looked up at him, the ghost of a suspicion in her eyes: and they were both thankful to hear voices outside the door.

Derek lost no time in finding an excuse to escape

"Sorry if I bored you, Mother," he said, just touching her ivory-smooth forehead with his lips. "But you brought it on yourself!"

"Stupid boy!" she rebuked him sweetly, and

patted his arm. "It was most interesting. I quite enjoyed it."

Derek grimaced. It always worried him that, in the sacred name of politeness, she would tell needless lies.

Van had opened the card-table and Lord Avonleigh was shuffling. Derek stood by him a moment looking on; then touched his shoulder. "Good night, Father," he said; and Lord Avonleigh looked up, a twinkle in his eye. "Going to bed? I don't think!"

"No, I'm going to smoke and read in the study."

"Unsociable cub! Why not stay and take a hand? Cut-throat bridge is poor fun."

Derek felt nonplussed. His abstention from bridge was part of the accepted order of things. It was a purely protective disability, and no one troubled their heads about it when Ina was at home. At any other time he would have frankly excused himself; but to-night compunction stirred in him and he temporized.

"What's the use, father? You know I'm a duffer at it. You'd all be wanting to cut *my* throat before the rubber was out!"

"That's quite possible; but, whatever the provocation, we promise to abstain! Esther"—he raised his voice a little—"you promise to abstain?"

Lady Avonleigh, who had not been attending, looked a little blank. "My dear Evan, what *are* you talking about? You know I only take it medically."

Van was seized with a discreet fit of coughing, and Derek bit his lip. Lord Avonleigh's muscles from long practise were under better control.

"Van, behave yourself!" he said *sotto voce*, then turned to his wife. "I was suggesting, my dear, that we should take Derek medicinally for our convenience and his good. He's too modest by half."

"Well, if he doesn't want to play—he won't. Why worry him?" she said sweetly; and Derek heartily wished he could take her at her word.

"Ah! that's the way you've spoilt him, Esther!"

But she was impervious to irony. "I'm sure no one could ever say I spoilt my children," she retorted with serene complacence and perfect truth. "I wish you'd stop talking nonsense. I thought we were going to play bridge. Sit down, Derek, if you want to stay; and do try and remember what are trumps."

They cut for partners. Derek put up a prayer that Van might fall to his lot; but his prayers were seldom answered. The cards consigned him to his mother—and he changed places with Van.

"Kick me if I look like forgetting what's trumps," he muttered with a wry smile.

But if he avoided that elementary sin, there were pitfalls in plenty for the absent-minded; and Derek—no card-player—was incurably absent-minded at bridge. To-night he was still further hampered by pin-pricks of remorse at having withheld his true reason for refusing India. Once he failed to notice his mother's call in clubs. Once he misled her by

playing from a weak suit, in a purely perverse spirit of experiment—just to see what would come of it.

Disaster came of it and Lady Avonleigh's not unnatural apostrophe: "Really, Derek, you are *too* stupid!"

Finally he revoked and she almost flung down her cards. Needless to say they were beaten ignominiously.

Derek pushed back his chair. "I'm awfully sorry, Mother," he said in a repressed voice, but it was Lord Avonleigh who answered him.

"My fault for over persuading you."

"Well, I said I was useless—a duffer."

"And you went out of your way to prove it?"

Their eyes met and the sense of a double significance flashed between them.

"No need for that, worse luck!" Derek said ruefully. "It's the way I'm made."

"There *are* limits, in fact!" Lord Avonleigh reminded him, a gleam in his grave eyes. "Well," we won't victimize you—or mother any more."

Derek rose with so audible a sigh of relief that Van winked at him over Lady Avonleigh's graceful bowed head. She was pensively shuffling; bored with the interlude; not heeding their talk.

Derek did not kiss her again. As for his father—though he knew young men of his own age who thought no shame of it—he could not remember having kissed him since his first home-coming from Winchester. On that occasion his natural impulse of

affection had been checked by the remark that he was getting too old for nursery ways.

“Blounts don’t kiss,” he had been gravely informed; and—though a twinkle lurked in the gravity—it was literally true.

## CHAPTER IV

“ Each in its little sphere of joy or woe,  
Our hermit spirits dwell and range apart. . . .”—KEBLE.

ON Saturday afternoon guests began to arrive ; and they sat down twelve to dinner that evening. It was little more than a family party. The big shooting week-ends began with the pheasants in October. Meantime there were partridges. There was golf and tennis, billiards and bridge, to save twentieth-century guests and hosts from the burden of making conversation. There was the famous Avonleigh port and liqueur brandy ; the scarcely less famous grapes and pears ; and last, not least, there was that all-pervading sense of stability and comfort, with no jarring note of ostentation to spoil the harmony of the whole.

From this it may be gathered that, physically and socially, a week-end at Avonleigh Hall left little to be desired ; yet among the county neighbours were certain perverse spirits—Lady Forsyth, for instance, and Lady Lenox—who found the human atmosphere of its stately draught-proof rooms a trifle chilly and its gracious, punctilious hostess more than a trifle



dull. Hence the adjunct of the plain daughter—who so upset Van—whenever Sir Eldred came to stay with his friend. In addition to the daughter he invariably brought a polite message from his wife—a sufficiently distinguished artist to take refuge behind pressure of work or the resultant need for rest. Lady Avonleigh's regret, on each occasion, was equally polite and equally insincere. No shadow of suspicion troubled her; for she never dreamed that man, woman, or child could find her hospitality anything but acceptable. She had a mild liking for Sir Eldred, who treated her with marked courtesy, partly to atone for Quita's defection, partly because she was the wife of his friend.

The two men had much in common. Both—wife and children, notwithstanding—were creatures of the "lone trail"; both took a keen interest in county affairs. They were still further linked by a taste for local archæology; and Lenox, in his patient, thorough fashion, was amassing material for a book to be written in collaboration—one of these days. To him the news of the Bombay appointment was a blow; but he was putting a cheerful face on it. And at dinner he tried, for his friend's sake, to arouse in Lady Avonleigh some show of interest in Indian affairs.

His daughter—a plain but pleasing replica of himself—seemed in no way over-awed by her slightly formidable host, who had a real affection for her, perhaps because she was so patently her father's daughter. "A fine manly girl!" he would say with

his twinkle at Van; and it was not altogether the mere perversity of a parent that made her seem easier to come at than his own girl, whose bright surface was scarcely more yielding than the surface of a billiard ball. Presumably her K.C. had discovered a soft spot somewhere: always supposing her heart had any voice in that crowning social function, her marriage. To judge from appearances they were as unsentimental and practical a pair of lovers as even the twentieth century can produce. One could watch them, at ease, without the faintest risk of trespassing on private ground.

They were sitting together, opposite Derek, who had not yet seen the new member of the family, and, (in secret) had felt vaguely sorry for him. Now he perceived that his pity, besides being unbrotherly, was superfluous to wit. Ferrars—that was the K.C's name—looked as if he might well prove a match for the girl who had graciously consented to bear his name and share his income and shine in his reflected brilliance. He was quite ten years her senior and he had the flat lip, the mobile mouth and penetrating eye of the successful Man of Law. He had also, Derek noticed, a very square thumb. "Ina," he sagaciously reflected, "won't get much change out of those eyes and that thumb once they're man and wife." But then Ina would get the sort of change she really wanted—money, distinction, the envy of her world. For her K.C. had more than brains. He enjoyed intimacy with political stars of the first magnitude. "And his

friends say he may rise to *anything*," she had confided to Derek half an hour before dinner with a metallic sparkle in her eyes. He, on his part, would have the honour and privilege of marrying a Blount of Avonleigh. A thundering good business proposition all round, Derek concluded, with a touch of young cynicism. Well—so long as *they* were satisfied——

And they certainly looked it. Derek, being partnerless—with young Schonberg on one side and Marion Blount on the other—was not distinguishing himself conversationally. Karl was half English, half German, and a pleasant fellow enough; but Derek, like Miss de Vigne, was "prejudiced"; and—in spite of Karl's frequent visits to Avonleigh—they had not progressed much beyond formalities.

At the moment, Karl was arguing across the table with Van, and Marion Blount was absorbed in her French Count; so Derek had leisure to observe the new element and to wonder at the apparent readiness with which even independent men and women slipped their necks under the fatal yoke. Marriage, dispassionately viewed, seemed to him the most insidious and inflexible of all the shackles that constrain the human soul. "And what shall a man give in exchange for his soul——?"

The large, competent worldly face of George Ferrars, looming above a silver basket piled with grapes, made him feel suddenly abashed. It was as if Ina's lover had said to him, with his flat legal

intonation: "You precious young fool! How much do *you* know about it all?" Not very much, Derek admitted. But still—look at men like Sir Eldred Lenox and his father——

"Well, Derek, when *are* you going to wake up and talk to me?" Aunt Marion's voice, friendly but incisive, broke the thread of his thoughts. "Are you in love too? Or hypnotized by George? He *has* a certain hypnotic quality. And you, my dear boy, have no dinner-table manners whatever."

Derek, at the onset, had frowned and blinked as if a sudden light had been flashed in his eyes. He was a bad subject for direct attack; apt to roll himself up like a hedgehog and present a surface of prickles to his rash assailant. But the Honourable Marion Blount was nothing if not direct. Her decisive features proclaimed as much; and her hazel eyes—deep set like her brother's—had something of their hawk-like gleam.

"I'm awfully sorry, Aunt Marion," Derek apologized gruffly. He looked and sounded so far from contrite that she laughed and inflicted an "ant's nip" on the back of his hand.

"All the same, I'm really angry with you," she went on, under cover of the general buzz of talk. "Your father tells me he actually offered to take you with him, and you *refused*!"

Derek winced under his prickles. He thought: "How like a woman; bringing it up in this crowd!" And he said rather stiffly: "It was hard luck—on both of us. But—it wouldn't have worked. I can't

explain. And I can't help it if you *are* angry. You don't understand. But I believe—anyway—father does."

"Your father understands this much," his aunt retorted unabashed, "that you can all be counted to go your own ways without troubling your heads about him or any one else in creation—even his own wife——"

"Mother?" Derek took her up sharply. "You're not fair on her—ever. You don't make allowances. Father says it would be a risk."

"*She* says so, my dear boy. And he shields her, like the gentleman he is." Her tone was less incisive now. Its quietness carried conviction—which made Derek angrier still.

"If *he* shields her, how dare you——!" he checked himself. "How can you know?"

"Because he is my brother, and for me there is no one like him in the world." Her voice grew quieter still so that he could hardly hear her through the clatter and chatter, the lively volley of chaff kept up by Jack and Ina, Karl and Van. "He doesn't need to tell me things. I know him inside and out as none of you do—or ever will."

Thus goaded, Derek ventured a bold question. "Is that our fault—entirely? Does he give us much of a chance?"

"No. He's a difficult creature; a bundle of contradictions. But—underneath, he's splendid. He says hard and cutting things, I admit. But when it comes to action, he's far too patient with

you all. As for risk——! He talks about *her*. No one thinks of the risk for him."

"For *him*?" Derek's heart stood still. There were no prickles to contend with now. "What's wrong? I didn't know——"

"Of course not. You aren't supposed to. I'm not supposed to. But I do. And—your mother does, as far as she ever lets herself know anything that is likely to make her uncomfortable."

"Oh—don't!"

She caught the pain in his low tone and flashed a smile at him. "You're a loyal son! Anyway, I can see—if she can't or won't—that he's keen to have one of you with him. And it tells me more than he imagines."

That was too much for Derek. Remorse overwhelmed him.

"Aunt Marion, I'd never have refused if I'd guessed. And—I'm willing to go now, if it's—if there's——"

He broke off, checked by an embarrassing sense of publicity—though no one heeded them: and she turned on him with a sudden softening.

"I'm glad to know that, Derek. But—I doubt the wisdom of seeming to go back on your decision. It might look like mere wobbling. Or—he might suspect. He's got his other eye on us now. And I don't want to spoil things. I'm so enchanted to be going. I'll see after him. Never fear. I want him to take Van. But he's set on leaving him in charge. At least—so he says. I believe he knows Van would

refuse: and he won't face that. Really you are *the* most detached family——! Each twiddling on your own pivot—self-centred——”

“Am *I* self-centred?” Derek struck in.

“Not quite so bad as the rest. But still—look at you, over this business. You've got some precious maggot in your head. And you carry it off and hide it like a dog that's found a bone.”

Derek laughed and helped himself to a glorified trifle that was respectfully nudging his elbow.

“Not for the same sort of reason,” he said. “None of them would care twopence about my bone. And—if we are . . . not seeming to care, who made us that way? Aren't you a Blount yourself?”

“Very much so. And ‘Blounts don't kiss’! I know all about that. We're hard outside and soft underneath. And your mother's the other way round.”

“Mother's *not* hard.”

“Isn't she? Bless the boy! Well, if you prefer it, she's smilingly immobile where her own interests are concerned.”

Derek said nothing. The talk was dying down. Personalities were no longer safe; and Miss Blount, after a brief attention to her trifle, remarked in a more conversational tone: “I spent a week at Inveraig when I was up North. Mr. Macnair of course and that sweet Sheila person. *There's* an amalgamated family if you like. And mostly unrelated.”

Derek twinkled. “Perhaps that's why.”

"It's not. You know that perfectly well. It's because Lady Forsyth is the pivot. That woman has always held her family in the hollow of her hand. So of course they were all snatched away from her, except one. The irony of things!"

At this point Ina challenged her across the table.

"I say, Aunt Marion, George and I are scheming for an Indian honeymoon. So we can take you and father in our stride. Ripping notion, isn't it?"

"Oh, ripping!" Miss Blount agreed with emphasis. She detested that all conquering adjective which had swept every other off the board.

But Ina was deaf to the mild hint of reproof. "George's idea," she went gaily on. "India's quite the smart thing to do now-a-days; and, as a honeymoon, it's rather a novelty. He thinks he can manage three months. A jolly long moon! But travelling and seeing lots of people, I 'spec we'll pull through without boring each other to tears."

George—who was discussing with Comte d'Estelle the relation between German sensibilities and German self-assertion—acknowledged that compliment with a grave inclination of his head.

"Bother that old Count!" she whispered. But Ferrars did not seem to hear. He was keenly interested in racial idiosyncrasies; and Ina, with a small shrug turned her batteries full upon Jack Burlton, whom Derek intended to annex for serious conversation on the first opportunity.



## CHAPTER V

“ In a time of sceptic moths and cynic rusts,  
And fatted lives, that of their sweetness tire,  
In a world of flying loves and fading lusts,  
It is something to be sure of a desire.”—CHESTERTON.

“ Age may have one side, but assuredly youth has the other.”—R. L. S.

THE official evening, divided between billiards and bridge, offered small chance for intimate talk. Derek would have liked to carry Jack off for a smoke more satisfying than the polite cigarette; but he had the grace to defer his own pleasure till the official business was over.

Very soon the four young men drifted into the billiard room, where Van and Karl proceeded, with careless ease, to “ walk over ” Derek and Jack; but before that process was complete they were joined by the two girls.

“ Hope we’re not spoiling your sacred game ! ” Ina remarked cheerfully, quite aware that her hope was vain. “ But our respective fathers have retired for an archæological gossip and we seized the chance to escape. Elderly bridge is so damn dull.” She

winked at Derek, who was known to disapprove. "Derek's frightfully shocked. He's blushing! But I'm not past praying for, old boy I can still manage to bridle my tongue in polite society."

Derek treated this sally with brotherly disregard. It was Jack who responded, flourishing his cue like an assegai. "Thanks for the hint, Miss Blount. Now we can all be as jolly impolite as we please!"

Billiards gave place to pool; and pool degenerated to a lively rag in which balls and cues played a prominent part.

Punctually at 10.15 came Jervis with "drinks," and Ferrars in search of the beloved; and very soon after, Derek escaped, closely followed by Jack.

"I'll come in and raid you, old fellow, when I've got rid of the world's fetters," he said as they halted outside Jack's room.

Five minutes later he reappeared in a luxuriously soft camel's hair dressing-gown with brown points, settled himself on Jack's bed and explored a capacious pocket for pipe and pouch. Jack, in striped silk trousers and vest, was at the washing stand.

"I got a scrawl from Gay yesterday," he informed Derek from the depths of a vast sponge. "Posted at Southampton. It was the most beastly rotten luck missing her by the skin of my teeth."

"Well, you blithering idiot, if you'd only told me——!" The unflattering epithet was the measure of Derek's sympathy; and Jack turned on him a moist, glowing face of reproach.

"I *like* that, when I was simply thinking of you

and your old München. Also—as it happens, I couldn't tell what I didn't know. Who's the blithering idiot now?"

Derek apologized to a violently agitated towel. "Rough on both of you. But she thought you could get across before she sailed."

"Rather! If I have to swim the Channel. Chuck along my coat, old man. Isn't she simply topping?"

Derek smiled. "She's charming. The way she hailed me out of the window made a deep impression on our suburban fellow passengers. Was her father French-Canadian? She spoke of cousins."

"Not close cousins. Her father was pure French. But he had connexions out there, who took him into their business. Gay was born at Montreal: and she has a married aunt there now, fearfully keen on her. They came home a few years ago and they've been bothering her to go out ever since. But she wouldn't leave Mother. Now—Mother's gone, they've got her, worse luck!"

"For long?"

"Hope not. But it's more than a mere visit. If they show any signs of freezing on to her they'll have me to reckon with." He sighed and regarded Derek with an injured air. "The times I've planned to introduce you two! And then you go and introduce yourselves behind my back! It's—*it's not cricket!*"

That was his severest form of denunciation, and Derek felt convicted of sin.

“Very careless of us!” he remarked, gravely considering Jack’s splendid appearance in his silk sleeping suit, with the light shining full upon his sleek brown hair, quaintly emphasizing the tilt of his genial nose and the dimple in his chin to which even his best friends alluded at their peril. And few cared about taking the risk. For there was more than six feet of him with thews and muscles to correspond. He was not yet twenty-one; and at the moment he reminded Derek of a large good humoured St. Bernard puppy.

“Poor old Jacko—it was a shame!” he added soothingly.

“Yes, it was—it was a bally shame.” Jack tried hard to look tragic, but his whole make up was against him. “Everything’s beastly all round. Her confounded people might have waited till the Army had swallowed me. Home’ll be simply rotten without her. Thank God for Oxford, anyway—and your fourth year. No more hivering about that, I hope?”

“No more hivering—and no more Oxford, worse luck!”

Jack flung down the ivory brushes with which he was quite superfluously polishing his hair. “Well you *are*——! Why the dickens——?”

“I’m afraid that would take a good deal of explaining. It’s just an idea. Rather a drastic idea. It’s going to take me to the ends of the earth and knock a few years out of my life as an average English gentleman.”

Jack groaned. "What's *come* to you, Dirks, in the last forty-eight hours?"

"My notion's come to me," Derek answered with his sudden smile. "And I warn you it's an *idée fixe*. So you needn't exhaust yourself by hurling epithets at me."

"Thanks very much! But what *is* your confounded notion? May a mere outsider be permitted to know?"

Derek drew himself up. "After that, I'm blest if I don't give you three guesses and tell you which is the right one—to-morrow morning."

"And I'm damned if you do!"

Jack spoke quite coolly; but, almost in the same breath, he hurled himself on Derek, who went clean over. For several minutes they rolled and scrimmaged like a pair of puppies, gurgling and choking with laughter, yet fighting for all they were worth. Though Derek had the greater skill, he was badly hampered by his dressing-gown and the fact that he was under dog.

In the end he found himself ignominiously pinned to the bed by a pair of strong hands, while Jack knelt above him demanding information.

"Deliver the goods, you secretive villain—or I'll choke the life out of you!" was the mild manner of his request.

"Right you are. Pax!" Derek panted; and seizing the two hands wrenched himself free. "Nice sort of way to treat your lawful host! You get into bed like a good little boy. Light up and give me a chance."

He did not hurry over the pipe preliminaries. He saw the whole thing quite clearly from Jack's point of view ; and it was not in him either to exalt his precious scheme or enthuse over it. So he sat there, his arms folded on his hunched-up knees, and made the best he could of a difficult business.

Jack listened in growing wonderment, his eyes fixed on Derek's face.

"Comment is superfluous," he remarked impressively, when the tale was told. "And what has 'the noble lord' to say to all that?"

"The noble lord hasn't heard all that. It's not the sort of thing one would go gassing about. And don't *you* gas about it either—or I'll skin you alive."

Jack's eyes had an odd, elated look. "Am I the one and only being you've honoured in this fashion?"

"Yes—so far. Of course I shall tell Mark."

"Damn!"

"Jacko, please don't make a giddy ass of yourself. Mark's the only person who'll come within miles of understanding. I'm not sure he isn't half responsible——"

"One damn the more!" Jack retorted unabashed. He was jealous of Mark, not without reason. "But what *did* you tell your guv'nor?"

"Oh, I made things as clear as I could ; and he was jolly decent about it. Didn't press for details. Thank heaven, as a family, we respect each other's reserves. There was only one horrid jar. He wanted me to go out with him as Private Secretary"

—or some such desperate character. Well—I felt I couldn't. And I had to tell him so. And I simply hated it."

Jack's jaw dropped half an inch. "You chucked a chance like that? Your own father too! Derek, you *are* a sanguinary fool!"

Derek regarded him pensively, without rancour. "I thought that would be your lucid summing-up of the situation."

They were silent a few moments: Derek remembering, with a pang, Aunt Marion's talk at dinner; Jack interested, sceptical, yet aware of lurking admiration. Derek certainly had the courage of his crazy convictions.

"Oh, Lord!" he groaned, skilfully tossing his cigarette end into the grate. "Why on earth do things go so contrary? I'd give my eyes for that sort of job. India, sport—the whole blooming show. And you, that can have the lot—going out steerage. Rubbing shoulders with a herd of swearing, spitting bargees. Filthy food. Filthy talk. My hat!" He paused—realising details. "It begins to dawn on me that you're rather a splendid sort of fool——"

"Oh, dry up," Derek said sharply; and Jack, aware that he had sinned, meekly accepted the rebuke.

"Well, when do you start on this personally conducted tour?"

"At the end of next month."

"Bo-hoo!" The boy's foolish grimace cloaked a

very real sinking of the heart. "And I'm to be left lamenting! Trinity, with no Dirks. Home, with no Gay. And my poor dear old gov'nor sitting like a ton of coals on my chest—Gay says she mentioned it to you."

"Yes, she did; she seemed anxious."

"Not without cause, worse luck! I'm anxious too."

Derek looked reproachful. "That's the first I've heard of it—and the talks we had out there!"

"Well—I didn't want to be a spoil-sport, when you couldn't escape my charming society! But I'm jolly glad Gay did speak to you."

"It was no more than a hint. What's the damage?"

"Wish I knew! It's the cursed vagueness of the whole affair makes it so worrying. But there's no blinking the fact the dear old Dad's not the man he was three or four years ago—financially or otherwise. The proud notion that I was to adorn a crack cavalry regiment seems to have melted away. Last vac the blessed old muddler started burbling about the Gunners! Me—that have taken Law prelim: and can just distinguish a circle from a triangle! I modestly suggested the Indian Army, half in joke: but he seems to have cottoned to the idea. I don't believe Hal will get Oxford: nor Jeff, Harrow. And every vac we're favoured with increasing doses of old Schonberg, Mrs. Schonberg and all the little Schonbergs, till we're on the verge of open mutiny. Even when I come here I'm up against another one!"



“Rotten luck!” Derek’s tone was gravely sympathetic. “But Karl’s a decent sort. More English than German. His mother was half Irish. Van thinks no end of him. He has a perverse kink towards anything German. Probably caught it from the Foreign Office. It’s in the air there.—But what the deuce do you imagine old Schonberg has to do with the bad turn things are taking?”

Jack sighed portentously. “If I could answer that in good rousing English, I might get the gov’nor to sit up and take notice. I only feel it in my bones—and so does Gay—that the old devil is a blood-sucker. He’s got his fingers in no end of commercial pies.”

Derek nodded. “I know he’s connected with the big metal Combine. I heard quite a lot about it from an Australian Rhodes scholar last term.”

“Yes, that’s his biggest pie. And Dad says he’s a power on the Stock Exchange. And he has some sort of footing in that blooming old Deutsche Bank, which he talks of as if it was God Almighty. And I believe he runs an hotel on the East Coast and Lord knows what else. He must be simply made of money; though he doesn’t live like it at Randchester. You say—what can he have to do with our rotten luck? Well, out there I got a sort of notion”—he leaned suddenly forward, his good tempered face tense and earnest. “I got it off the foreman of that Italian gang on the line. You remember, we had a long jawbation——”

“About the Germans in Italy—yes.”

“ He was rabid against them. I didn't tell you half he said, because it gave me horrid tweaks. I wanted to talk it out with Gay. And now she's gone, I can't keep it bottled up any more. That fellow declares the Germans are rotting Italy's trade—*for the Italians*:<sup>o</sup> secretly getting all the strings into their own hands. I couldn't follow half the stuff he talked about 'key industries' and things; but I gathered that their beastly banks have a lot to do with it. Advance money and that sort of game. More sporting than our highly respectable concerns. He told me a long yarn about his brother's glass-making business in Florence: how it was slowly undermined and ruined; and then swallowed up by a big German business that brought the whole thing to life again in no time. Glass, it seems, is what they call a 'key' industry—*so's metal!* ”

There was a significant pause then Jack said slowly: “ Doesn't the parallel strike you? ”

Derek scowled thoughtfully at the bowl of his pipe. “ Great Scott! Isn't that rather tall? ” he said at last.

“ Think so? Well—listen what happened, when I got home, to calm my foolish fears. I found the gov'nor in a queer mood. Cheerier than usual, but kind of jumpy underneath. And the very first evening he started talking of his own affairs, which isn't his habit by any means. I gathered that for some time things have been on the down grade; just slipping and slipping.—Nothing startling. No big losses. If there had been, he might have pulled

himself together. But he's a slow mover, and his faith in Burltons is about all he's got in the way of religion. I felt frightfully sorry for him, poor old chap, and just a shade sorry for myself. For he hinted at cutting down my allowance and little practical jokes of that sort. Then, when he'd thoroughly worked up my feelings, he pitched in his final bombshell."

Again the boy had a dramatic pause. "Yes. You've hit it," he replied to the enlightenment in Derek's face. "Schonberg to the rescue. Now—doesn't the parallel fairly hit you between the eyes?"

"Looks fishy," Derek agreed. "And what form is the rescue to take?"

"Oh, he'll prop up the firm financially by the grace of his old Deutsche Bank. Boom it among his influential friends in the City. They've a superstitious veneration for him there, 'còs everything he touches turns to gold. He'll enlarge the business. Probably flood it with German shareholders. And it's to be 'Burlton and Schonberg Ltd.' The fellow's got us fairly on our knees."

"It's simply beastly," Derek said with emphasis. "But if we *will* let our business world and the City get over-run with foreigners——! And your father doesn't object?"

"I wish to God he did! The sheer relief of it blinds him to everything else; also his faith in Schonberg. I told him straight that he was selling himself to the devil; that, in less than no time, the

whole concern would be German from top to bottom. As it is, the works are flooded out with German engineers and accountants and clerks. Cheaper and more docile the gov'nor says. So all the while he's been slipping down hill, he's been absorbing more Germans into our good old British business. Probably one of their dodges for preparing the ground. I said he could halve my allowance, and I'd chuck the Army and go into any old hole where I could make a modest living. I vouched for it the kids would put up with things in the same spirit; and I frankly informed him he was as blind as an owl in daylight where Schonberg and Co. were concerned. But d'you suppose it was a mite of use?"

Derek didn't suppose so. But even in this tragic emergency his first thought was: "What on earth would happen if I let out like that to Father?" He was never-endingly amazed at Jack's "free and easy relation with 'old Burlton': epithets flying one moment; and an arm flung round his shoulders the next. Aunt Marion was right about Avonleigh. They were five detached units each twirling on his or her own centre—

Aloud, he said: "I expect you got back a Roland for your Oliver—a 'young fool' for your 'old owl!'"

Jack assented gloomily. "That's the curse of it. 'Old owls' have such an unfair pull over 'young fools,' even if by some amazing chance the young fool happens to be in the right. And I'm dead certain I am right; but there's no making him see it. Because he once knew one kind of Germany, he

can't, or won't believe there's another kind that we're mostly getting over here. We undergrads know a thing or two about the German professors and Modern German education—don't we? But where's the blessed use of knowing *anything* when you only get called a fool for your pains?"

Bitterness was so foreign to Jack's nature that this last made a deeper impression on Derek than all that had gone before. But he had small skill in expressing sympathy.

"It's a disease we're safe to grow out of" he remarked consolingly.

"Yes—when it's too late to be any good. And then we'll be on the way to becoming old owls ourselves!"

Before that awful prospect they were both silent. Then Jack heaved another portentous sigh.

"There! I'm through with my jeremiad. Thanks awfully, Dirks, for putting up with me. It's been no end of a relief getting some of it off my chest. *You* understand, if no one else does."

"Oh yes, I understand right enough. But I can't do a thing to help you. Wish I could." He pocketed his pipe, rose and stretched himself. "We'll have a rousing old gallop to-morrow morning. That'll cheer you up."

"Rather! Nothing like it on earth. I shall go for Indian cavalry if home cavalry can't be did. Blowed if I touch Schonberg's money. I'll take what Dad can give me—not a penny more. Open another window, old chap. The room's reeking

with your pipe, and I don't want to be in your lady mother's black books."

"No fear! I'm a chronic offender. If old Con does scent a whiff in here, *she* won't give us away."

As he went past the béd, Jack flung out a hand, and Derek's closed upon it vigorously, without a word.

## CHAPTER VI

"I am at ease now: worldly, in this world,  
I take and like its way of life; I think  
My brothers, who administer the means,  
Live better for my comfort—that's good too."

BROWNING.

THE heir of Avonleigh was troubled in spirit: not because his father would soon be leaving England, but because the proud load of responsibility for Avonleigh, and the smaller estate of Trevanyon on the Cornish border, would then rest on his own shoulders. And Van had so little taste for responsibility that he would make a long circuit to evade it. Even while he listened to Lord Avonleigh's announcement, that Friday evening, he had been instinctively casting about in his mind for ways and means to that end: and on Saturday night an inspiration arrived.

It consisted of a single word—Karl.

While Jack, on one side of the wall, was cursing the father, Van on the other was thanking Providence for the son. From time to time he caught the murmur of voices and wondered idly what particular form of rot those youngsters were jawing about.

Could he have overheard them, he would probably have been moved to good-humoured scepticism ; or, like Burlton, would have fortified himself against suspicion by dismissing Jack as a fool. And in both cases the instinct sprang from the same root.

To outward appearance there seemed little enough in common between the young Oxford intellectual and the middle-aged business man : yet, in both, the slippered ease of mental and spiritual security prevailed over the love of truth. By different routes, they had reached the same terminus ; and of both it may safely be said that they would sooner hug a comfortable illusion than suffer the discomposure of a mental spring cleaning. So each, in his own characteristic fashion, unwittingly assisted the march of Fate.

Van, it must be owned, had no earthly reason to distrust young Schonberg, who was half English, as Derek had said. The two had gone up to Balliol the same year : Van from Eton ; Karl, as a science scholar from Harrow. A chance incident had brought them into close contact. A mutual taste for music and sheer temperamental antithesis had done the rest.

Karl was assiduous in the pursuit of knowledge. Van had never been assiduous in the pursuit of anything—except a pretty woman. Yet he was potentially the cleverer of the two. He possessed, in fact, a fair share of his father's fine mentality, blanketed by the intellectual apathy of his mother. And he was apt to get more credit for his buried talents



than those who made the most of lesser gifts. From early days his parents had expected great things of him; partly because he was Van, partly because his serene air of detachment seemed to imply that he "could an' if he would." But at Eton he had achieved little beyond a wide popularity, two prize essays and a certain distinction in the cricket-field. At Oxford—well at Oxford, there were the boats and breakfast parties and dinners at the Bullingdon and Union debates, and billiards, and sentimental summer evenings in a backwater, with the pretty girl of the moment; and every conceivable inducement to cultivate his most expensive tastes. Oxford, in fact, was so full of a number of things, that schools and lectures had been rather in the way. Happily lectures could be cut; and that seemed to be their *raison d'être* in the set to which he had gravitated by the law of human magnetism.

It was Karl who had first shaken the comfortable conviction that cutting lectures, rowing, debating, and fitful reading in "vac" was not the high road to honours; and Van coveted honours for the credit of the family. Karl did not cut lectures to any extent; and, as they grew more intimate, Van would discover that on convivial nights—while he had been dining and dancing and drinking more champagne than he could carry—Karl had been sitting up almost as late with a pipe and strong coffee and a pile of books on physical science.

"I've told my father I shall take a First and I intend to do so," was his justification of this unortho-

dox behaviour. "So you see—I must work. I haven't got brains like yours."

No sarcasm was intended. Karl had not the gift of sarcasm and he had a prodigious admiration for "the Honourable Evan," as he persisted in calling him till Van threatened to break off the connexion. He simply spoke the truth. He had not Van's natural aptitude. But his brain possessed the supreme Teuton quality of absorbing and classifying every scrap of knowledge that could be turned to account and mechanically shedding the rest. By this simple process he could house a vast miscellany of facts without undue effort; and by this process he hoped to gain the coveted 'First.'

Van had objected to Karl's unfailing industry, partly because it was inconvenient; chiefly because it seemed a tacit reflection on himself. So he had taken a perverse pleasure in luring his friend from the path of virtue: no such hard matter once he discovered the weak links in his armour—music and women. Karl was amorous and sentimental; and at banquets or "blinds," when he reached the stage of "having drink taken," he was the best company in the world.

But in the middle of their second year his Teutonic brain reasserted itself; and there had been something like a scene. It was Karl's declaration of independence; and it had the surprising effect of firing Van with a tardy desire to convince his friend that a Blount could shine with the best of them, if he chose to exert himself. But, like the hare in the

fable, he had slept a little too long. He succeeded in winning the Newdigate ; but in the schools he had to be content with a Second, while Karl secured his First.

His disappointment had been keen and galling ; but he had consoled himself with the reflection that at last the troublesome, necessary process of education had come to an end for good. The idea that it could, or should, be a lifelong process had never visited his brain. That was the fundamental difference between himself and Derek. In Van's eyes Eton and Balliol were simply caste marks of the first order ; hence their intrinsic value.

As for Karl, though he loved the grey city of spires, he tended to see it as a sort of intellectual farm-yard where brains were scientifically crammed for degrees that were practical means to an end. After Oxford he had gone to the great German school of Forestry at Asschaffenburg, where he filled a fresh set of mental pigeon-holes ; and from forestry his untiring brain had passed on to the problems of scientific agriculture. Under the tutelage of a first-class land agent, he had done such good work that already he himself aspired to an agency ; which sane and modest ambition Van had been suddenly inspired to fulfil.

The more he looked at his inspiration the better pleased he felt with himself and it. To dethrone Malcolm was, unluckily, impossible ; but Van felt convinced he could never work amicably with that crusty Scot. Loyalty on the one side, and tact on

the other, had so far prevented open friction between them ; but the undercurrent of antagonism was there. Van wondered if his father had discovered it. Probably not. His faith in Malcolm was implicit ; and any step towards limiting the agent's sphere of influence would have to be cautiously taken. But the idea of Karl as his lieutenant was so alluring that no minor considerations could be allowed to thwart it.

Moreover, his flattering offer might serve to oil the wheels of things. For there were certain unsettled scores between these two—that intermittently worried Van's not too exacting conscience : and Karl had been known to make disconcerting remarks. An appointment with a good salary, out of his father's pocket, could scarcely be twisted, even by Van, into the payment of his own private debt ; but it would ease his mind to do Karl a service that would incidentally be a boon to himself. Though there was already a " job " in view, Van did not see Karl refusing Avonleigh. He would spring it on him to-morrow. And there was a certain fifty pounds, dating from a good while back. It might be as well to pay that off ; an earnest of more to follow when the convenient moment arrived.

Sunday was always a quiet day at Avonleigh. Its sacred character was officially recognized though individuals were free to disregard it. Derek and Jack were already in the saddle, while the rest of the party were still standing about round the log fire in

the hall—the friendliest gathering place in the whole house—with its vast armchairs, oak settees and Persian rugs; its portraits of bygone Blounts and its unique display of mediæval armour.

Outside, it was a morning to charm away the blackest shadow of care that ever sat behind a horseman: a quakerish morning of light cloud, and fugitive wistful gleams of sunshine. Comte d'Estelle challenged Honor Lenox to a five mile walk along the lake and over Burnt Hill: and when the four elders drove off to Ashbourne Church, Van and Karl drifted to the billiard room. Both were inveterate players; and the billiard table was responsible for a good many of those awkward corners that had left Van so deeply indebted to his friend. Thanks mainly to Karl's backing, he had won through his four years at Oxford with no more than a hill-ock of debt—visible to the naked eye. For he set great store by his home halo; and did his best to keep it bright.

They played one closely contested game before Van sprang his inspiration on the unsuspecting Karl. Then as he clicked the ivory markers back into position, he asked conversationally: "Have you done any more about that job you mentioned last week?"

"No. It's in Norfolk. A biggish place. Good money. But I'm not dead keen."

He spoke absently, in jerks. He was moving round the table, making cannons of the silkiest softness at impossible angles, while he talked.

And Van, having lit a cigarette, stood watching him, fascinated by his uncanny accuracy of hand and eye.

Externally, there was little of the Teuton about Karl, except for his rather prominent light blue eyes and a certain thickness about the full view of his nostrils and lips. In profile, his nose was straight and comely. His moustache studiously refrained from any upward curve and his thatch of straw-coloured hair was brushed backwards, in correct fashion, from a remarkably capable forehead. His dress and manners bore the Public school and University stamp—a stamp it had become the fashion to deride before it proved itself, on battlefields and in training camps, the hall-mark of the race.

“When you say ‘a biggish place,’ ” Van remarked, after his silence, “d’you mean anywhere near the size of this?”

“Gracious, no! A man doesn’t expect to start at the top of the tree.”

“Sometimes he can start a good way up, if he’s lucky enough to have exceptional capacity—and friends in the right quarter.”

At that Karl left off making cannons and looked hard at Van, who leaned against the window frame caressing his moustache.

“My dear fellow, what *are* you getting at?”

Van looked back at him with his most engaging smile. “What I’d like to be getting at is the chance of harnessing your exceptional capacity to the woods and fields of Avonleigh which you said yourself last

week would repay more scientific handling."

Karl's grunt of astonishment was emphasized by the thud of his cue on the carpet. "Well—of all the bomb-shells——!"

"A pleasant one, I hope?"

"You mean me to take it seriously?"

"Why not? I wasn't perpetrating a ponderous joke."

"But, my dear chap—in the first place there isn't a vacancy; in the second, I'm not exactly *persona grata* with your father——"

"My father leaves for India next month. He'll be gone five years," Van announced with his faint drawl; and seating himself on the cushioned sill he proceeded to unfold the situation.

Karl listened half perched on the rim of the billiard table, thoughtfully swinging one foot.

"So you see," Van concluded with a Jove-like nod, "I shall be pretty well master here—for a good spell. 'Course I can't shift Malcolm altogether. But I'm out for up-to-date improvements; and I'll need an intelligent expert like yourself to back me up. In fact, a sort of locum tenens. For you don't catch *me* vegetating at Avonleigh. And as you've a natural taste for the country, the whole thing dovetails rather neatly—what?"

Karl sucked in his lips and released them with a smack; an ugly trick that always annoyed Van.

"It's a tempting proposition. Naturally, I'd like to work for you; and being here so much, I've observed things a bit. But I still consider myself a

learner. Surely you need some one more experienced ? ”

“ Oh, of course if you're such a modest violet I must look elsewhere. ” Van's tone was noticeably cooler. Karl's caution and lack of enthusiasm hurt his vanity.

“ You seem in a mighty hurry to chuck me ! ” that young man remarked with perfect good-humour.

“ Chuck you ? Why, you won't even look at my offer. ”

“ Don't be a bally ass, Van. I'm staring at it with all my eyes. Blinds one a bit. ”

He slipped off the table, and seated himself in the window.

Van proffered his cigarette case. “ Russians, ” he said.

Karl helped himself. “ Have you spoken to Lord Avonleigh ? ” he asked.

“ No. I only thought of it last night. ”

“ D'you suppose—he would approve ? ”

“ I really don't know. He might get worrying for fear it should make friction. But he's giving me a pretty free hand ; and I've every right to choose my man so long as I respect his sacred Malcolm. I want some one on the spot who stands for me. I doubt if I'll give up the F.O. job. It's interesting. Keeps you 'in the know.' A week end with the pheasants, an occasional tour of inspection, and a roaring house-party for Christmas—that's about the ticket. I can work my mother once I get her to myself. I shall set her up in Avonleigh House and



she'll soon be wondering how she ever stood living out of town. It'll suit Ina's book, too, till she marries her K.C."

Karl's sympathetic smile was tinged with amusement. "You evidently intend to have the time of your life," said he.

"Hope so: if you play up and Malcolm doesn't make himself a nuisance. I'll find decent quarters for you; and there'll always be a bed in my 'digs.' Officially I shall live with my mother. But I'll hang on to the Albany suite; and when I'm bored stiff with playing the dutiful son, I'll haul you up on a telephone wire and we'll buzz round—unofficially!" Van's left eyelid twitched. "Begin to see daylight now, K? Are you still stone blind—what?"

"I'm still feeling a bit dazzled," Karl admitted honestly. "You must make allowances! I'm wanted, so far as I can gather, to make the woods and home farms more all-round profitable working concerns?"

"Precisely. My father keeps more acres under corn than most big landlords do these days. He sticks to it on principle, though he admits it doesn't pay as it ought to do; and of course he was badly let down in the eighties and nineties like the rest of the farming world. You talked immensely learned last week about ways and means of getting a bigger yield from the same acreage. And I bet you've picked up a tip or two, these last months, ambling round agricultural Germany. We've no end to learn from your country in that as well as other things."

"Not my country, thanks very much," Karl corrected him in an odd contained voice, and Van smilingly accepted the rebuke.

"Good old Karl! A shame to rag you! But nationally, a man takes after his father."

"Well—personally I take after my mother. It's her I have to thank for the priceless boon of a liberal English education. And I've spent enough of my vacs in Germany to know just how priceless it is."

"Hear, hear!" Van remarked softly. "These days one's led to suppose it's the other way round; that our youngsters are wasting their substance on riotous athletics and husks of dead languages when they ought to be mugging up Chinese and specializing technically for all they're worth."

"That's the swing of the pendulum, and no doubt it'll swing too far. I've had the luck to see something of both sides and I can only say 'Commend me to the liberally educated muddler.' Nine-tenths of the technically trained prodigies are working for him, and under him, because they're not fit for anything else. Of course there are shining exceptions everywhere. But, take it all round, Germany is grinding out a race of highly-trained clerks and mechanics who are most of 'em engaged in filling the pockets of commercial Jews. England, with all her bungling, is still turning out men and leaders of men."

Van lifted his eyebrows. "You seem to have had an extra special eye-opener over there this summer. D'you hold forth in that vein to the mighty Schonberg? He's no mere clerk or mechanic."

“ No. He’s one of the shining exceptions. We get a good many of them over here. And when they do shine, I admit they blaze around to some purpose.”

“ You also admitted the other day—to return to our cornfields—that they manage to squeeze twice as much out of a hundred acres of poor soil, in a harsh climate, as our fellows do with soil and climate in their favour.”

“ That’s so.”

“ Well, what’s the recipe? Bet you’ve got it all up your sleeve, you walking encyclopædia!”

Karl’s conversation for the next fifteen minutes bristled with technicalities enough to justify the epithet and bewilder the brain of his liberally educated friend. He supported his facts with figures: and Van’s lazy amusement was tinged with genuine respect. Though the two had been intimate for years, he still constantly found himself astonished at the varied amount of practical knowledge Karl kept up his sleeve, ready for service as required.

When the disquisition was ended he remarked genially: “ Couldn’t follow half of it. But if you’ll only play up and work a few of those miracles here, I’d get no end of kudos for discovering such a treasure!”

Karl smiled at that characteristic inducement. “ You can’t work miracles with the land,” he said. “ It’s a matter of steady plodding in the right direction; and over here the human element’s against it. The British farmer’s a distrustful beggar—not

without good reason. It's not that he's merely ignorant, his whole level of intelligence wants lifting. He also badly wants the security of State aid and protection, which he isn't likely to get while Free Traders rule the waves!"

"But, my dear fellow, we can't burden the country with tariffs simply on his account."

Karl shrugged. It was an old bone of contention. "Then you must accept," he said, "the farmer's lack of enterprise."

"Very well—I accept it! All the same, with a fellow like you in charge, a good deal might be achieved. Scientific treatment of the soil. Aren't there fertilizers and things——"

"Oh yes, there are fertilizers and things! Wonders are being done with fixed nitrogen in Germany and South Norway. But the casual folk here won't trouble their heads about it, so long as grain ships come pouring in——"

"And they will continue to come pouring in, for ever and ever, amen," Van chimed in piously. "But the point is—what about my proposal?"

Karl looked thoughtful again. Then he said frankly: "You must admit that so far the whole thing is a trifle sketchy. Naturally I should like to feel sure that your father's agreeable; and that Mr. Malcolm—even if he isn't agreeable—would not be obstructive. As it is, my position's quite undefined."

"I—see," Van said with a deliberate drawl. "Truth is, you'd sooner boss a smaller place than play second fiddle here. And the fact that I'm keen

on the plan doesn't affect your business point of view."

At that Karl fairly lost his temper.

"If you're death on talking such putrid rot, God himself can't prevent you," he retorted, and walked away to the mantelpiece. Then he swung round and looked hard at his friend who still sat there smoking, apparently unperturbed. "You know you didn't mean that, Van. And you know I'm a cautious mover. Like to look all round before I jump. And if I put my back into a thing I want to feel I can hang on long enough to reap results. But you say yourself it's all in the air as yet: so I vote we drop it, till your affairs are more settled—and get on with our game. Meantime, I won't accept anything else. That satisfy you?"

"Oh yes. I'm agreeable," Van answered coolly. "I shan't worry you again. If you want the job you can say so. Now—come on. I owe you a licking; and I shall have particular pleasure in administering it!"

The achievement took time and all Van's skill; for they were well matched. When it was over, he laid an envelope on the table.

"Yours," he remarked genially. "A good deal over due. Thanks very much—and all that."

"Sure you can spare it conveniently? I'm in no hurry."

"That's a mercy, 'coz it's all I can spare conveniently—just at the moment."

Karl pocketed the envelope. "Don't worry

about that, old chap," he said. "I'm always glad to be of use."

"*With* reservations!" Van reminded him feelingly: and they went on into the hall where they found the elders just back from church

## CHAPTER VII

“ One sleeps, indeed, and wakes at intervals . . .  
And my provisions for life's waking part ;  
Accordingly, I use heart, head and hand ;  
All day I build, scheme, study and make friends.”

BROWNING.

ON Monday they had a great day with the partridges and on Tuesday Karl departed, without any further allusion to their talk, leaving Van still mystified and a trifle on edge.

He spent most of the week lecturing at a big Agricultural College, turning his tour through South Germany to practical account ; and on Saturday he travelled North.

He had small love for the great gloomy manufacturing town in which Adolf Schonberg and John Burlton were leading lights of the civic and commercial world. But he was fond of his father, though there was little intimacy and less understanding between them. Very early and very decidedly he had announced his unwillingness to enter any one of the elder Schonberg's prosperous lines of business. To his surprise and relief his father had refrained from pressing the point ; and had transferred the

honour to his purely Teutonic stepbrother, Heinrich, aged fifteen, now being educated in Germany to that end. Karl's own modest ambition had, at first, been treated as a whim unworthy of serious opposition. Then, quite suddenly, Schonberg had changed his tune: and if the boy wondered a little, he had asked no questions. The fact sufficed.

His own English upbringing—a concession to his mother—had inevitably tended to separate father and son. Devotion to the memory of one dead woman was by this time the only strong link between them. For Karl knew very well that his father's second marriage implied no change of heart toward her, who had been the sole romance of his life. It was the duty of all good Germans to propagate the race; and Schonberg needed a woman in the house. That was his common-sense view of the matter; and his occasional remarks on the subject were frank to a point that jarred on Karl's finer susceptibilities, even while he appreciated his father's somewhat peculiar notion of loyalty to the dead.

Because of that loyalty, Karl had been reluctant to suspect the nature of Schonberg's manifold business activities. But—as he grew in years and in knowledge—he began to be afraid lest his father might be numbered among those who were secretly intriguing against the great country, which had sold them its birthright for a mess of pottage, and had largely contributed to their success. He hated himself for harbouring the idea; but it persisted nevertheless.



Outwardly his father seemed as amicable to England as himself; even when he laughed at her failings and extolled the greatness of Germany, from whom these good, slow confiding Britishers had an infinite deal to learn. Schonberg and his kind—by implication—were there to instruct them for the good of their souls—and their pockets. It was Germany's God-directed mission to permeate the world, that earth might yield her increase to the utmost; and man might rise to the full height of his powers. Such was his free translation of Pan-German ideals; and if Karl took it all with a few grains of salt, he kept that fact to himself.

It was this vague distrust that impelled him to steer clear of business connexion with his father, and it partly accounted for his doubtful attitude towards Van's astonishing offer. Not that he seriously supposed Schonberg had the will or the power to harm Lord Avonleigh: but he was Teuton enough to know that his inordinate appetite for information could not be dismissed as a mere hobby. There was direction behind it, though he could not see whither it tended.

It was true, also, that he had felt himself accepted at Avonleigh simply as Van's friend; and, if it came to giving his services, he demanded more individual recognition. He knew his charming friend well enough to foresee that if Malcolm proved obstructive, Van would keep discreetly aloof and leave him to bear the brunt of things. It was a pity, too, that Van was so casual about money

Karl wondered if Lord Avonleigh realized it and whether it would complicate their business relation? But chiefly he had been hampered by that vague, unreasoning distrust of his father.

On his northern journey he had leisure to consider these things, to rate himself for a disloyal son, and finally to decide that, if his father showed any marked eagerness for him to accept the less responsible post, he would risk Van's passing annoyance and refuse outright.

The Schonbergs and Burltons inhabited large, unbeautiful residential houses on the outskirts of Randchester; houses with immaculate front windows and gardens, decorously screened by a wall of evergreens from prying eyes and the dust of the high road. Somewhere beyond the evergreens you would find the inevitable group of lilac, laburnum and crimson may—the three graces of town gardens; with a cypress thrown in for dignity or a weeping ash for shade. Schonberg's residence was christened "Freischutz." Burlton had found the startling legend "Cotopaxi" printed on his large white gate and had banished it in favour of Warton Grange. The houses were less than a mile apart. Driving from the station, one came first to Warton Grange; and Karl, from his open taxi, spied Mr. Burlton on the gravel path. Norfolk suit and tweed cap proclaimed him on the verge of his week-end flitting for golf. Karl waved his stick, shouted to the driver and sprang out.

"Take my traps on, will you?" he said, adding

sixpence to his fare, "and say I'll be coming along shortly."

He had a real affection for "old Burlton"; and, on the whole, found his three younger boys and widowed sister more congenial than the step relations at "Freischutz." But it puzzled and disappointed him that he could make so little headway with Jack. He knew, from remarks at home, that partnership was in the air; but of underlying causes he had not the remotest idea.

John Burlton came forward to meet him with a friendly smile on his commonplace, capable face. He was a thickset man in the early fifties; externally alert and mobile, internally slow-moving and limited, with as kind a heart and as much genuine honesty as is compatible with success in the "savage wars of peace." Like many Englishmen of his class and age he was more concerned to keep his figure from spreading than his mind from rusting: hence the disparity between his muscles and his brain. He belonged to the type of man—common enough in these islands—who will make a hard and fast statement, listen placidly to a string of shattering arguments, and, at the end, repeat his original remark as if no dissenting word had been uttered. Outside his human affections, the pith of life was summed up for him in two words—Burltons and golf. Five days of the week he devoted to the first; two to the second. And those two days were sacrosanct. Only the trump of doom would interrupt his weekly pursuit of the elusive ball and the sacred

rite of keeping himself "fit." Had the frivolous ventured to inquire "fit for what?" no doubt but he would have answered gravely: "For more golf."

"Just flitting, as you see!" he greeted Karl in his cheery week-end voice. The week-end voice was Jack's invention; but it certainly had an unmistakable ring seldom heard within the four walls of his office. "The car'll be here in a minute. You home for long?"

"Only till Monday. That's why I nipped out. Have the youngsters anything on to-morrow?"

"An all-day match. The town against Wingfield."

"Good. I'll come along and applaud."

A parlourmaid appeared at the front door. "The telephone, please, sir. Mr. Schonberg."

With a muttered expletive, Burlton hurried into the study; and Karl, waiting in the hall, was divided between sympathy and amusement as he listened to the rapid one-sided colloquy jerked out by Burlton in tones far removed from those of his greeting.

"Monday—first thing Monday—*what?* But, my dear fellow, it's impossible. I tell you I'm just starting. Yes—yes. Two friends meeting me at Warton. What? Oh, I don't think so." A longish pause. "There's the car coming round—oh, if it's as urgent as all that. But, confound it all, man, I shall miss my train——!"

The click of the receiver on its hook was followed by the reappearance of Burlton, his week-end aspect

clean gone; vexation in his voice, a worried look about his eyes.

"Never *knew* such a fellow as your father for doing things on the nail," he said with a short laugh. "He wants me round there. Some business he's convinced won't wait. There's no putting him off, and I'm blest if I shan't lose my train.—Put in the traps on the chance, Robson." This to the mystified chauffeur, who had just announced the car.

Then he thrust his head into the drawing-room. "Good-bye, Alice. Business at Schonberg's; so you may see me back, unless I drive the whole way. Damned if I won't drive all the way," he added with decision when the door was shut. "Shall I give you a lift, Karl?"

As they rolled smoothly along the metalled highway, Burlton repeated, in a more genial tone: "Never knew such a fellow as your father. I don't believe he has two ideas in his head outside business. Of course it's half the secret of his success. But in my opinion it's good for a man to shake himself free once a week. It's a queer thing about foreigners, however long they live here, they never seem to get the hang of the week-end institution—the finest in the world."

As a matter of fact his own loyalty to the said institution gave him a pleasant sense of superiority to the indefatigable German whose devotion to business seemed likely to be the means of his own salvation.

“ You still reckon my father a foreigner ? ” Karl asked. “ After twenty-seven years in England ! ”

“ Well—he seems to remain one, doesn't he ? Though to me, Germans never feel quite so foreign as any of the other lot. Frankly, Karl, in some ways he's one of the most amazing men I've ever met. But I can't have him playing old Harry with my week ends ! ”

Freischutz was a few degrees uglier than Warton Grange : but the affinity of type was evident, as the car swerved through the gateway and followed the curve of the lawn, where a silver fir stood stiffly in place of the weeping ash. The house itself was still further disfigured by Mrs. Schonberg's deplorable taste in curtains.

The sound of the car brought Schonberg himself to the door—a bulky ill-dressed figure of a man, firm, fleshy and powerful ; the hands notably so with a large thumb which he used to enforce his arguments or his will. And the face matched those forcible hands : prominent eyes under a vigorous forehead, a thick, assertive nose, sensuous mouth and good strong teeth stained with tobacco. His colourless hair and moustache were well brushed upward, and the slight droop of his lids gave him a misleading air of inattention which he found very useful on occasion. But his son—if not his friend—was quite aware that very little escaped the attention of those sleepy-looking eyes or of the brain behind them that noted and registered every serviceable item with mechanical precision.

When the car drew up he was standing on the topmost of three shallow steps that led to the front door. He smiled genially and waved his hand.

"Karl also! That is goot, golf-sticks also!" He jerked a derisive thumb towards the bag of clubs. "You still belief you will go?"

"Of course I'm going—if I have to drive there," Burlton answered doggedly. "Come on. Let's get through with the business as soon as possible."

Schonberg lifted his shoulders. "To make way for the greater business—hein! It will be your ruin yet, my friend, this graze for walking—walking—walking after one foolish leetle white ball. Firmly I belief you would prefer losing a big deal to a round of golf! Lucky for Burltons there was nò golf in England when your great firm was glimbling the gommerical ladder."

But Burlton was in no mood to appreciate a sally at his own expense. "I have yet to learn that the interests of the firm have ever been neglected for my hobby," he replied with a touch of stiffness. "I earn my leisure and I work the better for it."

"Well—well, we will not guarrel over my little choke. Gome, you shall hear if I had reason to upset your plans." He laid a heavy affectionate hand on Karl's shoulder. "Glad to see you, my boy. We shall talk later. Business first, pleasure after—even if it is a week end—hein?"

Burlton had passed on into the hall and the two exchanged a smile of amused understanding before Schonberg followed his unwilling guest. For all his

Inflexibility, the man had a strong human streak in him and strong passions, both kept in a separate compartment from that unwavering, inhuman machine—his business brain.

Nearly an hour passed before Karl heard the study door open, and saw—from the windows of his own smoky sanctum—Burlton's car roll away through the gathering dusk. Then he strolled in to see his father whom he found—as always—in his big swivel chair, a cork pen in his hand, a drooping German pipe between his teeth.

On his expansive desk not a paper was out of place. Every pigeon hole was neatly packed; and the shelves that rose above them held books of reference and scientific journals dealing with an amazing variety of subjects. In the window on a heavy polished table stood a castor-oil plant in a rotund pink bowl that clashed violently with its magenta mat. There were faded red velvet curtains, and privacy was secured by a Japanese bamboo blind. Over the mantelpiece, against a background of dingy wall-paper, hung a water-colour study of Karl's mother—the one relatively beautiful thing in the room. It was a tender, intelligent, rather wistful face—a rarified edition of her son's—with eyes that seemed to follow you when you moved. Directly under the picture stood a vase of early chrysanthemums. Winter or summer that vase held its tribute of flowers from the man who had married again eighteen months after her death.

A folding leather screen held the four younger



Schonbergs—Heinrich, Gretel, Johann and Fritz ; but the good Anna, who had contributed these human legacies to the Fatherland, was nowhere in evidence. Karl often wondered whether the omission hurt her feelings, or whether she even noticed it? If she did, she gave no sign.

The whole room, though shabby and unlovely, had a certain air of homely comfort ; but it was stuffy to the point of suffocation and it reeked of strong tobacco.

Schonberg greeted his son with a guttural " Ach-ha," removed his spectacles and indicated a deep leather chair near the fire. In that chair, facing the window, sat all his visitors. He himself, when he turned his swivel seat to confront them, had his back to the light. It is a common trick of diplomats, and it had often served him well.

" Sure I'm not interrupting? " Karl asked as he sat down ; and Schonberg smiled—a wide smile that revealed all his teeth.

" Sush a kind of interruption I could more often put up with ! But we cannot offer you here the attractions of Afonleigh Hall."

" That's an unfair hit ! " Karl retorted, and shied away from the subject. " Is Burlton really going to drive out to Warton this evening? "

Schonberg shrugged. " I imachine not. Poor defil ! He must sleep Friday night in his own bett. He shall miss one round after his leetle white ball ; so he has no thanks for me, though to-day I haf done him a goot turn, worth to miss three week

ends for. Ach, these English! In all the years I haf known them, never haf I come to understand their madness of a ball——”

“ It’s a very healthy sort of madness.”

Schonberg regarded him thoughtfully; then he looked up at the face of his dead wife. “ You are nearly so bad! Not quite. Because of her wish, I haf made you almost one of them. But—*Gott sei dank!* You haf more sense——”

“ I’m not so sure! I didn’t find any lack of brains at Oxford——”

“ Cht-cht!” Oxford was dismissed with a gesture. “ Brains are of one kind. Sense is of another. I am still so often astonished—as to-night—*how* they are fools!” Suddenly he raised his heavy lids, revealing the pale iris full circle and changing in a flash the whole aspect of his face. “ Ach zo, the goot Gott knows his business. Wise and foolish created he them—so the wise should profit by the arranchement!”

“ D’you mean—take advantage?” Karl asked quietly, and something in his tone checked the older man’s unusual burst of frankness. His face resumed its look of sleepy geniality.

“ More often lose than take, my boy,” he answered lightly. “ But you are here to tell me news—of your lectures and your fine friends. You had a goot time—hein?”

“ Ripping time. I always do. I’m going there later for the pheasants.” He paused; then added casually, “ They’ve just had a bomb-shell sprung

on<sup>r</sup> them. Lord Avonleigh's going to India next month, as Governor of Bombay——"

Again that sudden, odd lift of the lids. "Ach-ha. They send him to India? No fool—he. A strong man. But what will come to Afonleigh? Your dear friend is too mush man-about-town to lif there. They will shut it up? Perhaps let——?"

"I haven't an idea. Van has his work at the Foreign Office. But he's keen about the place, too. He actually suggested putting me in charge of the woods and home farms to make them more profitable working concerns."

"You?" Schonberg drew in his lips precisely as Karl had done when Van broached the idea. Then he sat silent puffing at his pipe and regarding his son with sleepy, inscrutable eyes. "And you accepted—hein?"

"Oh no!" Karl answered lightly. "It<sup>r</sup> didn't amount to an official offer. Just a suggestion because he knows I've studied things pretty thoroughly."

"You can thank your Cherman blood for that. It is the talisman. Because of it we become always more indispensable to lazier peoples. How are you inclined yourself? You haf not yet refused Sir Thomas Wade?"

"No. I'm thinking things over. Of course I'd like Avonleigh. But I want to know just what my position would be——"

"To tague all trouble off his shoulders and win credit for him in his father's eyes!" Schonberg answered with a guttural chuckle. "That is the

fashion of these young lordlings. I know them ! But Afonleigh is a fine estate. It is likely you would haf a pretty free hand. And afterwards—who can tell ? ”

Karl shook his head. “ I don’t flatter myself I’m likely to step into Mr. Malcolm’s shoes ! I gather he’s not easy to work with. And of course in Norfolk I should practically run the show.”

“ That is the tempting bait ! Nashural enough ! ” And Schonberg fell into a thoughtful silence staring at the fire.

Karl, surreptitiously scanning his face, was pricked with sharp curiosity. If one could but lift the curtain and read the writing on the brain ! Nothing his father had said showed the slightest bias one way or the other : yet—for no definable reason—Karl felt more uncertain of him than ever. He had looked for a sign, and the very fact that he had found none reawakened suspicion. He knew his father for a man of definite opinions—often aggressively so. Yet he had refrained even from proffering a word of advice.

“ Why on earth——? ” mused bewildered Karl ; and his bewilderment was tinged with annoyance. He had imbibed at school and college a love of straight dealing ; and in his father’s presence he was constantly worried by the sense of hidden undercurrents that effectively killed all frank natural intercourse. So he sat silent waiting for Schonberg’s next remark.

“ Hanged if I’ll give him a lead,” he thought with

a touch of boyish obstinacy. "Even if I have to stick it out for half an hour!"

Happily he was not so severely taxed. He got off with seven minutes by the black marble clock. Then Schonberg removed his pipe and shifted his eyes to his son's face. They had no softness in them except when they rested on Karl—his Freda's legacy.

"Well, well, you shall think it over," he said. "You are a man now. It is your affair. I would bet ten pounds the scales are tilted towards Afonleigh and your friend Fan!"

"I wouldn't be surprised!" Karl answered with a non-committal smile and heaved himself out of the deep chair—a little of the study atmosphere went a long way.

"Nor I! Only remember—if it is Viscount Afonleigh or Sir Thomas Wade you haf first-class qualifications and your serfices are worth goot money.—Now I haf letters to finish. Sush a pile! No slack time for me—if it is weeg-end! Perhaps goot luck for Burlton I do not run after balls or make a dust all ofer the country egsercising my car!"

"Is the partnership coming off, then?"

"That is for Burlton to say. I haf made myself useful. It is the duty of all goot Chermans abroad If indispensable—zo much the better——"

"You're still a good German abroad—yet you choose to live here as a naturalized subject!"

Schonberg adjusted his spectacles and vouchsafed his son a benign smile. "It is precisely abroad

that goot Chermans haf the most important werg to do—for the benefit of both gountries, my son ! ” And with that cryptic remark Karl had to rest content, though the word did not accurately describe his state of mind.

Ten days later came a letter from Van.

“ MY DEAR OLD CHAP,—

“ I have braved the elements on your behalf and write to let you know that the coast is clear. I said I wouldn’t make the next move. But man is the victim of his virtues, and my natural magnanimity has carried the day. So—if you are agreeable, roll along our way on Friday. Birds are plentiful, and you can see for yourself if my father is agreeable enough to satisfy your modesty and proper pride and all that. As regards my own feelings, you know as much as you deserve to know. So tumble along and don’t be a scarlet fool—and you won’t regret it !

“ Yours—within reasonable limits.

“ V. B.”

Karl, having made up his mind, re-read that characteristic effusion with a pensive smile. “ That about settles it,” he said.

Later on, when he and his father were alone, he decided to announce matters without preamble. “ See if I can’t make him jump ! ” was his filial thought. But cleverer men than Karl had tried the same experiment without success.

He guilefully chose a moment when his father seemed lost in reflection to remark abruptly: "I've accepted Avonleigh. You were right about the scales!"

Schonberg, who was fingering two walnut shells, did not even look up from his plate. "Zo!" he gurgled in subterranean depths; and regarded his son with an enigmatical smile.

"Goot business for your friend Fan! But you neffer really had two minds about it."

The last was so unexpected that it turned the tables on Karl.

"I don't believe I ever had," he admitted; and directly challenged his father's gaze. It was like looking at two bluish discs of ground glass, half veiled by the drooping lids. Karl felt suddenly annoyed. He believed half of it was put on for effect. Behind those inscrutable eyes his father was as soft-hearted and sentimental as himself.

"I'm going down there on Friday," he said, to break the queer feeling of tension that grew with the silence.

"To take over charge?"

"No—to shoot pheasants! And I suppose there will be an interview with my formidable host!"

He grimaced at the prospect and Schonberg wagged his sagacious head with elephantine playfulness. "No need to fear him. He is doing goot business. You can bet, he knows it." Rising, he strolled over to the hearth-rug; and Karl, turning in his chair to face the fire, found his father looking down

at him with eyes that were no longer like discs of ground glass. "You are a damn goot boy, Karl," he said in a voice of real feeling. It was a discovery he made periodically, in a tone of virginal conviction; and Karl was prepared for the descent of a heavy hand on his shoulder. "If I gave up my own wishes because of your mother you have neffer caused me to regret it. Only stick on at Afonleigh and you will replace Mr. Malcolm yet.—I shall come down to visit you when I am able. And if Mr. Blount shall wish to let, it is possible I can help——"

Karl looked up quickly. "You seem keen on his letting. Have you got a bloated tenant up your sleeve?"

"In the world of finance it is not hard to find bloated tenants for sush a place as that," he answered, removing his hand and speaking in his normal voice.

"I don't fancy Lord Avonleigh would care about it."

"Nor I. But his son is otherwise. We shall see!" And quite suddenly Karl wished he had risked offending Van and kept clear of the whole thing . . .

On Friday he returned to Avonleigh and was warmly greeted by Van. The critical interview proved the simplest and pleasantest affair imaginable. Karl had never before enjoyed half an hour's talk alone with Van's father; and it moved him to honest admiration of Lord Avonleigh as an intellect



and a man. Altogether, it made him feel happier, more assured. These sensations he frankly confided to Van, who did not respond by telling him that it had required all his tact and power of persuasive skill to overcome his father's antagonism to the great idea.

Towards the end of October Lord Avonleigh and Derek left England with no premonition that they had actually seen the last of their prosperous, peaceful, dangerously casual country, as they had known and loved her all the years of their life. And Lord Avonleigh, stately and comfortably conveyed on a vast P. & O. Liner, had no inkling that his son was lodged in the hold of a tramp steamer with three hundred men of all grades and types jammed together like herrings in a barrel.

In this drastic fashion Derek had taken the plunge; and in this fashion he set out—resolute rather than hopeful—upon the six weeks' voyage to the other end of the world.

END OF BOOK II



## BOOK III

### Into the Deep

#### CHAPTER I

"Here is the land, shaggy with wood,  
With its old valley, mound and flood,  
They called me 'theirs,' who so controlled me.  
How am I theirs, if they cannot hold me?—  
But I hold them."—EMERSON.

"SHE'LL topple the wrong way, man. She won't fall true."

"She *will*—damn you!"

"She won't, the way you've notched her."

"She's notched true and she'll fall true. You keep your blank mouth shut and mind your own business."

"It's the whole camp's business if a tree that size topples the wrong way."

The two men stood beside the trunk of a mighty Douglas fir that lifted its head a clear hundred and twenty feet into the blue—a peer even among its compeers that thronged the belt of forest behind them. Before them the main clearing of Number

One Camp was splashed with noonday sun and shadow resonant with the clank of chain cables, the shriek of donkey engines and the noise of labouring men. Lumber jacks swarmed like ants over the bodies of fallen giants that only yesterday had stood as proudly erect as the living fir now marked for death. It was the accuracy of that notch that would enable the sawyers to "throw" their tree in any given direction: and it was Derek Blunt, in coarse shirt and copper-riveted dungarees, who stood there arguing the point. His lean brown face was no longer the face of a boy. The bone formations, that reveal a man's bedrock character, stood out more strongly. His skin was tanned by eighteen months of exposure to sun and wind on the plains of Australia and in the lumber camps of British Columbia. His unbuttoned shirt revealed the lighter tint of his chest and throat, and his weather-beaten felt hat was tilted backwards at a rakish angle. Caulked boots and a seven-foot saw completed the equipment of his trade. In that rough gear he looked every inch a woodsman and unquestionably a finer figure of a man than in any tailored suit of civilization. Health and confidence radiated from him; the unassuming confidence of a man who, by sheer energy and zeal, has attained to a certain mastery of his craft.

It was precisely that note of confidence which had annoyed Hal Symes, the "under-cutter," who stood scowling down at him from a steel-shod spring board fixed into the bark of the tree. He was a

loosely made man, with bleached fair hair, pale eyes, and a mathematician's brow that seemed oddly unrelated to the rest of his face. The trail of the waster, the easy-going sensualist, was over it all, from the heavy lids to the slack mouth and chin. Yet there were unmistakable marks of breeding about his ungloved hands, and in the English cadence of his voice. Years ago, in another life, Harold Symmonds had been a well-known figure in the little world of Cambridge. Mathematical dons had expected great things of him. But race meetings had lured him and women had made much of him. The force latent in his forehead and the weakness latent elsewhere had contended for his soul. And the weaker elements had prevailed. In the middle of his third year he had been sent down—and Cambridge heard of him no more.

By this time he was becoming a deplorably well-known figure in the mixed and casual logging world of British Columbia. His well developed muscles ensured him a fair sufficiency of dollars. The dollars ensured him a sufficiency of drinks and women; and presumably it sufficed.

Something of all this Derek had gathered from him at odd times, when whisky unloosed his tongue, or jealousy prompted an attitude of "I'm-as-good-as-you-are, anyway!" toward the younger man, whose descent into the lumber world had no apparent connexion with whisky, horses, or women. And Derek had other accounts against him in the eyes of this fellow Briton who had gone under. He had no

taste for gambling, drank moderately, was respected by the boys, and patently favoured by "Maggots," the camp boss. There was also Mrs. "Maggots" and pretty Lois Aymes down at Beulah Ranch—

Dislike, bred of jealousy, lurked behind the scowl with which Symes leaned over and once more tested his notch, placing his double axe in it and looking along the handle.

Derek—who did not fail to notice that his hand was perceptibly shaky—felt a faint tweak of anxiety when the "fallers" came swinging up with their long two handled blade.

Picked men, these, earning anything from eight to ten dollars a day. One was a big blonde Swede; the other a typical Canadian, straight-run, clean-cut, his honesty tempered with shrewdness if a business deal were in the wind.

"My! But she's a beauty!" he remarked, eyeing his victim with critical appreciation; and proceeded to cut a wedge for his spring board four feet above the ground. The Swede followed suit; and mounted on these planks, the men set to in earnest, working toward the notch; their slim boards springing in unison with the rhythmic motion of their arms.

Swiftly, remorselessly that strip of steel ate its way into the heart of the tree, while Derek stood watching; hoping he was mistaken about the notch; dreading the moment when the saw began to take murderous effect. Months of habit had failed to harden him.

Standing well away from the majestic creature—

so immense, so utterly defenceless against two pairs of skilled hands—he looked steadily upward. A small breeze tossed the higher branches, and on one of them a chipmunk—a fairy squirrel—sat upright nibbling a cone. When the singing note of the saw changed its tone, the men paused; and the Canadian squirted oil along the blade. Then to it again, till the moment came to “wedge her” lest the weight of the trunk damage the delicate, remorseless, instrument of death. For now the end was near. Gradually the tasselled head leaned towards its proudly erect companions. From the depths a hundred feet below came the first suspicion of a crack and a warning shout from the sawyers: “She’s moving!—*Timber!*”

The chipmunk, still nibbling, paid no heed.

Another crack: a report like a small cannon. Then the anguished sound of a mighty rending; the creaking and groaning of boughs wrenched from living trees, as their stricken fellow crashed through them, with ever increasing speed. . . .

And suddenly the whole clearing was alive with shouts and cries—the clamour of startled men.

Derek had not been mistaken. She was falling the wrong way—

Lumber jacks and Chinamen scurried out of the danger zone; the sawyers sprang backwards, swearing lustily; and the shriek of escaping steam from the engines was mingled with the scream of shattered branches, as the fir came smashing to earth with a thud that seemed to shake the very hills.

Nothing more considerable than a shack lay in the direct line of its fall; and that shack was flattened like a house of cards. But there were branches also. One damaged a donkey engine; another stunned a Chinaman; a third caught the Canadian sawyer and broke his left arm.

"Where's the blank-blank skunk that notched her?" he demanded fiercely of no one in particular. But Symes was not to be seen.

"Made tracks while his shoes was good!" remarked the sawyer's brother, who was rendering first aid. "Gée-whiz! If I'd'a caught him!"

Meantime the camp had recovered itself; and the men were at work on their trophy—limbers lopping off the branches, "buckers" sawing the trunk, with "snipers" on their heels to round off jagged ends.

Derek was among the "buckers," plying his saw that no longer engaged in gymnastics on its own account, as in the early days of their acquaintance. It was hot work and hard work, and it satisfied certain primitive instincts that are scotched, but rarely killed by the insidious process of civilization.

At last that which had once been a majestic Douglas fir lay stripped in the sunlight; reduced to mere logs ready for the powerful machinery of hooks and steel cable to work their will.

At a signal from the hook tender, the "donkey" whistled and the cable it controlled moved on, dragging the main log, with insolent ease, through a wilderness of fern and scrub, ploughing deep



furrows and uprooting young trees, landing its prisoner at last—bruised and battered—on the loaded trolley. An answering whistle from below heralded the appearance of a small railway engine; and the long black line of freight slid down the grade bound for a lower reach of the mountain river that would float the logs to their final destination—the saw-mills of Abe Callander in Red Cedar Valley.

As the last truck vanished, the gong from the cook-house caused a general stampede of healthy, hungry men; a mixed rough and tumble of human fragments—strapping Canadians and Swedes, wiry Americans and Italians, English, Irish and Scotch. There were men of education, men of character, and men devoid of both. But the bulk were of true lumber jack breed—simple and kindly as children when sober, mere animals when they were drunk.

The cook-house, where they congregated, had a friendly homelike air, with its laden bench-flanked tables and glowing stove at the far end; its piles of chopped wood breast high along the walls; shelves stacked with bright-coloured canned stuffs and slabs of bacon hanging from the roof.

Derek seated himself between a hard-bitten Cockney and the "winged" Canadian, whose temper was still simmering over the way he had been served by that "blank-blank son of a dog."

"The gopher darsn't show his face in here," the injured giant remarked with drawling emphasis. "Fear he'd get a fit of indigestion through swallowin'

half his teeth. If the boss don't fire him good *an'* quick this time, I'll say the word meself—an' quit. He'd oughter bin fired months ago. But he's got the soft side of the missus: an' 'Maggots' ain't boss in his own shack. Lend a fork, Derry, while I chop this stuff."

Derek lent a fork and briefly expressed his sympathy: then he fell to upon his own share with a will. He had learnt, by now, to bolt his dinner with the best of them and to waste no time in talk by the way.

When the stoking process was over, he filled a pipe and strolled off through a belt of forest to a lesser clearing, where the wide valley and towering peaks beyond came suddenly into view. Here two log cabins, partly scooped out of the hillside, represented Bill Margett's office and private shack, where his wife and seven-year-old son spent some two months every summer—entirely for his benefit.

As a matter of fact, he held that a woman was quite out of place in a logging camp; but Mrs. Margett's wifely devotion was not to be denied. Indeed, the good fellow had never yet found it in his heart to deny her anything.

So when the sudden breath of summer waked the sleeping forest, she would leave the little wooden house in Red Cedar Valley and migrate to Number One Camp. She was a townswoman by birth and temperament and she hailed from the Old Country. Traces of its so-called "snobbishness" still clung to her; for which reason she favoured Symes, the

degraded gentleman, rather than simpler men who were his superiors in everything but birth. She had also shown signs of favouring Derek, which annoyed him considerably, and, on occasion, provoked the shameless Symes to open jealousy. Matters were further complicated by the fact that Derek respected Margett and was adored by his small son ; while he heartily disliked the woman, whose chief pleasure in life seemed unconnected with either. But Mrs. Margett was masterful and insensitive, and knew very well how to play on the passions of men. It was her chief talent and she was not the woman to let it rust unused. She found the difficult Derek more interesting game than his forerunner ; and he, in consequence, found it no easy matter to keep clear of her without open discourtesy. So, by a perverse stroke of irony, he was impelled, out of consideration for the husband, to suffer the embarrassing attentions of the wife : and because, at times, he was not altogether impervious, he hated her the more.

To-day she had bidden him come and receive a list of commissions he was to carry out at Nealston ; as he had a few days' leave of absence, to do business for " Maggots " in that flourishing lake-side town. There were not many of the " boys " who could be trusted there on an errand of importance. The lure of the bar saloon had a way of undermining the mightiest resolves. But Margett had very soon discovered that Derek could be relied upon : so these little trips fell to him more often than not :

another mark of favour that pricked the jealous spirit of Symes.

Derek had no shadow of doubt where that gentleman had sought shelter from the wrath of the camp : and there he found him, thoroughly at ease, smoking and sipping lime cordial, in "Maggots" raw-hide armchair ; Mrs. Margett, also sipping and smoking, at his elbow.

As she rose to greet Derek, he hated himself for noticing that the two chairs were suspiciously close together. She was a woman of good carriage and seductive curves, who would presently be stout ; a dark beauty, of the type favoured in second-rate melodrama ; and, against the rough background of her husband's log cabin, she struck a jarring note of discord that she seemed at no pains to mitigate—rather the reverse. Her red blouse effectively illumined her ; and the hide arm-chairs were stacked with red cushions that arrived with her and vanished when she left the camp.

"At last !" she said with a clinging pressure of Derek's hand. "I thought, like as not, you'd forgotten everything but your fling in town and your Sunday on Beulah Ranch !"

"No fear I'd forget," Derek answered in his most matter-of-fact voice, ignoring the playful thrust. "Have you got the list ready ?"

"Well—thereabouts. What's the almighty hurry ? Sit right down and have a smoke."

Derek glanced at Symes, who was aimlessly turning the pages of a magazine.

"Thanks. I think I won't," he said politely. "It'll take all my time to get down to Macrae's before sunset——"

"*And*—you'd sooner miss an hour here than an hour there—that's the bedrock truth——?" She challenged him with a look so boldly significant that it drew the blood to his face; and at sight of it she laughed softly. "Poor old boy! Is it as bad as all that? Queer the way you men go down like ninepins before a soft clinging chit of a girl with hair that colour. But the lucky devil who gets her will find it a danger signal——"

"Honour bright, I don't know what you're driving at," Derek broke in desperately. "It's a longish trip. The Macraes have been mighty good to me, and I don't want to put them out by turning up late. As to Miss Aymes and the colour of her hair, it's no concern of mine."

At this point Symes, who had recovered his composure, was suddenly moved to reassert himself.

"Miss Aymes!" he mimicked with a throaty chuckle. "Ain't we the pink of propriety! You've not happened to notice, I suppose, that she mostly goes by the name of Lois among her pals?"

Derek, without looking round, put out a hand for his instructions.

"If you'll give me that list I'll be going on now," he said, heedless of her hint that it was incomplete. He knew she had lied and he would not play up to her; and she, with true feminine perversity, liked him the better for it.

With an odd smile she took the slip of paper from her davenport—the only piece of genuine furniture in the room. “There’s just a thing or two wants explaining, if your patience can stick it out five minutes longer!” she said. Then, half seating herself on a corner of the table, she leaned so close to him that her arm pressed against his shoulder, and proceeded to harass him with a string of details flashing a glance at him, between whiles, from under her lids. Detesting her, yet uncomfortably aware of her, he was thankful when the ordeal ended: so, in his own fashion, was Symes.

Derek, free at last, pocketed the precious list; glanced at him; hesitated a moment;—then the instinct of the gentleman prevailed. “Anything I can do for you?” he asked, “in a small way?”

Symes stared hard at him and said slowly: “We-ell, you can give my love to ‘the girls’ up Vere Street. And give Miss Lois an extra kiss or two on my account—if she hasn’t quite forgotten yours truly. She takes to kisses, that girl, like a duck to water.”

It did not occur to Derek that the man was paying Mrs. Margett back in kind: and his straight look had a gleam in it that recalled his father.

“You can do your own commissions in that line—no man better,” he said with quiet scorn. “S’long Mrs. Margett. Tell the boss I’ll be back on time.”

And so he made good his escape without a repetition of her intimate hand clasp—the sole satisfaction

he gleaned from that unpleasant quarter of an hour.

On the threshold young Bill charged into him—an excitable slip of a boy with his father's clear Canadian eyes.

"Say, Derry, do stop a minute. What you running away for?"

"Business, old chap. I'm off down to the Lake."

"Take me with you—*do* take me."

"Not this time. Some day—perhaps, if your dad would trust me to bring you safe back again."

"*Course* he would, you ask him."

They were free of the shack now, crossing the open; Bill trotting beside Derek, clutching his hand. Children were never shy with him nor he with them. He rarely caressed them or played the fool with them: but there were hidden currents of understanding that made their companionship an effortless joy. Some quality in them, which it never occurred to him to analyse, stirred the unplumbed depths of his manhood: and it was partly because Lois Aymes seemed to him, still, more child than woman, that the desire had flamed in him to flatten the face of Hal Symes for linking her, by indirect implication, with the girls up Vere Street.

Bill's company, after a quarter of an hour with those two, was like a draught of spring water after a glass of cheap liqueur.

When they reached the belt of trees through which he had come, Derek stopped and bade the boy run back again. He was forbidden to wander far alone.

"Say! You *will* ask my dad? Wish-you-may-die if you don't!"

"Wish I may die if I don't!" Derek assured him gravely. "And I'll bring you a surprise parcel on Tuesday. But don't you lie awake guessing!"

The boy gave his hand a convulsive squeeze. "My! Derry, I *do* love you. I'll be never so good till Tuesday." By way of guarantee he scampered across the clearing full speed, turned and fluttered a hand, then vanished round the corner of the hut.

Derek, eager to be off, went straight to the "bunk-house," a long wooden building with "beds" for forty men. These were made on the ground, and covered with straw and slender logs divided each from each. Derek, by good fortune, had secured a bunk near one of the cotton-covered windows. At the head end lay a canvas bag, his only item of luggage. It contained spare underclothing, a few books and home photographs, two pairs of flannels, and the beloved, identical Norfolk coat in which he had tramped through the Tyrol two summers ago.

Swiftly he exchanged his logging kit for his own garments; but he stuck to the faded felt hat with the up-turned brim. He was fond of it and possessed no other. Then he went off to saddle his cayuse, a graceful sorrel, with irregular white patches on his flanks and over one eye. He was a nervous, excitable creature, liable to buck in elated moods, and what he didn't know about trails wasn't worth knowing. Derek had christened him "Kitts" in memory of his own old friend at home. He loved



him dearly, and a close intimacy had been established between them. Even in his wickedest moods Derek could gentle him back to good behaviour ; and to-day he was in high fettle. Saddling and mounting him was a lively proceeding ; but it was achieved at last. With a final flirt of his heels he resigned himself to the inevitable, crossed the open in a series of bounds, and settled down to an easy canter as they passed out of the strong sunlight into the shadowy green silences of the forest.

## CHAPTER II

“To lose myself

Among the common creatures of the world ;  
To draw some gain from having been a man ;  
Neither to hope, nor fear,—to live, at length ! ”—BROWNING.

DEREK had a long ride ahead of him—through endless aisles of virgin forest, carpeted with moss and blueberry—to the point at which he would desert Kitts for the little mountain railway that linked the mining camp at Windyridge, with the service of steamers on the Lake ; but for him the journey itself was one of the chief virtues of his holiday. The immensity of these mountain forests, their “ shadowed leagues of slumbering sound,” laid a spell upon him and a few hours of unbroken solitude refreshed his spirit like manna from Heaven. He was not yet inured to the common trials of working and eating and sleeping in a herd : and in Abe Callander’s outfit there was the usual sprinkling of rough characters. But, taken all round, the “ boys ” were thorough good fellows within their limits. If whisky was their bane, they were yet singularly free from the meaner vices of town-bred men. And

among the better sort Derek had made a few staunch friends: strong, large-hearted, simple fellows, who would share their last quarter with him at a pinch. But it was friendship without intimacy; and the real hidden Derek still remained incurably alone.

For the most part, he lived too vigorously to be aware of it, except when the mood was on him; and to-day it was on him acutely, intensified by the little scene in the shack. He had been looking forward quite simply and naturally to his Sunday at Beulah Ranch—the children, the blunt kindness of Mrs. Macrae, Lois Aymes, and her pretty caressing ways. And those two, with their tainted minds, had be-smearred everything.

But very soon the brooding silence of the forest closed over him like folded wings; and he surrendered himself to the spell.

It was the brief, perfect moment of early summer when the snow-slides and the slush are over and the tyranny of black fly and mosquitoes is not yet. New life was quickening under the dankest sods, stirring in every leaf and blade. The very pines and cedars seemed to be secretly awake and aware. Small unseen things rustled in the undergrowth. Chipmunks flitted through the branches overhead. Their ceaseless happy chirruping—the only spring song of the forest—flickered, like a light, over unplumbed depths. But never a note of bird music, though one rode on, world without end. And to Derek's English mind, a wood without song-birds

seemed an anomaly as strange and sad as a night without stars.

At this hour, in all the woods of Avonleigh, in every coppice and shrubbery, the birds of home were singing their hearts out for joy that they were made. And Derek's heart hungered to hear them; to see the gleam of young leaves on his beloved beeches, the blaze of daffodils against the grey old house; to sniff the faint clean scent of wallflowers and new-mown grass. On the whole he succeeded in keeping the doors of his thoughts closed against such memories. But to-day the unsleeping thing had caught him unawares; and there surged through him such a wave of homeloning as he had not experienced since his first weeks in camp.

Though the splendours and sublimities of Canada dazzled his eyes and exalted his spirit, they were as dust in the balance beside that far-off insignificant island that was Home. Here was no sense of intimacy, no mist-blurred horizons. Here the heavens seemed higher, the depths deeper, the very mountains, in their magnificence, a shade too dominant, too sharply defined.

And the face of the land was mirrored in the soul of its people. Even while he delighted in their simplicity, shrewdness and untiring vigour, he found their characters, like their scenery, lacking in atmosphere; all foreground; few half tones. Bone of England's bone and flesh of her flesh, they were yet so distinctly un-English that looking into their minds gave him sometimes an odd sense of seeing his own

reversed, like hand-writing in a mirror. Their very love of country was a case in point. Derek, like most Englishmen, loved England for what she was. His Canadian friends, he found, loved Canada for what they themselves were making of her every day of their lives. On his side, the attitude of a son to a mother; on theirs, rather that of a mother watching and shaping the growth of her son. And again, he had discovered that his deep love of Nature, in all her manifestations, must be concealed like a vice if he wished to retain the respect of these human dynamos, who saw nothing to marvel at in the ghostly sheen of moonlight on leagues of snow-covered pines or the most arresting conjunction of mountain, forest and lake. They seemed about as much aware of it all as a Londoner is aware of his chimney-pots and shop windows. Their eyes beheld the visible garment of God, but their minds were intent on the absorbing business of remodelling it to fit the needs of man. To "fuss round" after scenery was the mark of the tripper, the tenderfoot, the weak-kneed sentimentalist. The true son of Canada demanded naked realities, with an insistence that tempted Derek, at times, to fling down the challenge: "What, after all, *are* the realities? The everlasting hills or your mushroom mining camp, that to-day is and to-morrow is scorched into ashes by the breath of a forest fire?"

But so far he had bridled his tongue; and his comrades respected him accordingly.

To-day, with sights and sounds of England tugging

at his heart, he felt suddenly, acutely out of tune with it all; suddenly, acutely homesick for the leisured, casual spirit of England, for her low hills and blue distances; for Van's chaff and a talk with his father and a sight of his mother's face; for clean linen and a good dinner and all the minor comforts of home that he had valued so little when they were a matter of course—

The real trouble, when these moods assailed him, was the knowledge that he had only to say the word, wire to his father, and in a few weeks he could be with him, seeing a new country, talking to cultivated men and women, enjoying the lawful pleasures that were his by right of birth. The way was open. No hindrance, save his own obstinate resolve to go through with it: a resolve that was likely to hold, even against odds.

And—on the whole—he had kept his own counsel. To his people he had vouchsafed little beyond reassuring generalities. Mark and Jack had been favoured with fuller information; but, even so, the half was not told them. About the greater part of that nightmare voyage in the hold they had heard nothing, nor ever would.

In all his sheltered days, he had not dreamed what misery, and worse, a man of gentle birth and clean instincts could endure simply from close, incessant physical contact with a very mixed crowd of his own kind: and the crowd packed into the hold of that tramp steamer had been largely recruited from the scum of great cities. There were scores, also, of

half-educated malcontents, with the virus of class hatred in their veins ; and to these his mere gentlemanhood had been his worst offence. His refinement of speech, his natural reserves, his willingness to help and serve—the hall-mark of the aristocrat—had all been so many targets for their unreasoning animosity and scorn. It was the kind of thing he would have refused to believe from another man's lips ; the kind of knowledge one did absorb, painfully enough, through the pores of one's skin. And three weeks of it had brought him near the end of his tether.

He remembered, with shame, a becalmed evening in the Indian Ocean ; a three-quarter moon beginning to take colour ; a flaming afterglow in the west that turned the waters to wine ; and, in the stern, among coils of rope, a lonely, disillusioned Derek, so bitterly at odds with everything that, when the time came to leave the vastness and the silence and the clean breath of the sea for the foul atmosphere of the hold, he had felt like slipping overboard, and taking his chance of a rescue before his strength gave out.

It was a mere desperate impulse, gone in a flash ; but it pulled him up with a round turn ; and it had marked a point from which matters began to improve.

There are good men in every crowd ; and several of these he had discovered, when he settled into his stride ;—men whose range of reading surprised him ; who could think and express their thoughts more forcibly than the average product of polite education. From these he had learned much about his own country and his own class, that enabled him to

look at both from a fresh angle of vision ; and with one of them he had struck up a rough and ready friendship that considerably enlivened the first dreary spell of job-hunting ashore.

Dan Maguire was as Irish as his name ; a born adventurer of unquenchable spirit, who at one moment would confound Derek for the fool he was to have been born an Englishman, and the next—with true Emerald logic—belaud him for the very qualities he derived from that pre-natal error. But for Maguire, those first days in Adelaide—chiefly spent in discovering the fraudulence of agents and their own entire superfluity—would have been a hopelessly grey and sordid memory. As it was, they had contrived to strike flashes of humour out of the very stones Fate offered them for bread. Jobs, the most hopeful-sounding, had a trick of evaporating or changing their complexion at close quarters. But Maguire, with “ *Sursum Caudas !* ” for his war cry, was unquenchable

“ Let’s be removing our patronage from this Queen of Cities,” said he, when Adelaide had metaphorically spurned them for the space of a week, “ and give the bally farmers a chance.”

The move up-country brought a change in their run of luck. It was high summer ; the farmers welcomed extra help ; and for the next three months Derek had his first taste of real manual labour ; carting, loading and doing odd jobs about the farm.

When brain and body became acclimatized, he found it pleasant enough, after the miseries of the



voyage. Though his breeding went for nothing in this, the most democratic of all British Dominions, the qualities arising from it went for a good deal. A British "tenderfoot," who seemed to recognize that he had everything to learn, was a sufficiently rare bird to impress even an Australian farmer: and Derek, while he worked, had kept his eyes and ears open. For, about this time, a thought had come to him that gave a new significance to his round of drudgery. If he could glean a little practical knowledge of up-to-date farming, his father might be induced to put him in charge of Trevanyon; and he would like nothing better on earth. Independence, personal responsibility and freedom from routine were, for him, the ideal elements in work and life: and the mere chance of achieving them was worth a passing sacrifice of all three. So—tired but resolute—he had bowed his back to weeks of monotonous and uncongenial toil—

Not so Maguire—a rolling stone by taste and temperament—

Early in the New Year, he grew restless, and proceeded to unsettle Derek with alluring second-hand tales of bush-life and the goldfields out West. Derek, though sceptical, was eager enough for fresh experiences, for the dangers and uncertainties that test a man's resources and his wits. In vain did the farmer confound the Irishman for a liar and the Englishman for a fool. A rise in wages had no magnetic attraction for men in the hopeful twenties bitter with the lure of the unknown—

So they set their faces westward ; and in a raw little mining town, on the coast, they encountered a friendly sandal-wood cutter, whose gilded yarns lured them into joining him for a spell. Their needs were not formidable—an axe, a sleeping blanket, and a gun ; stores and belongings piled on a hand-cart, which they must draw between them. With these they set out to work their way through the bush to a certain gold claim, where—according to their new friend, Foxy Lee—a man could pick up a fortune as “ easy as winkin’.”

Meantime there was the bush ; a vast tableland of red granite and stunted blue-leaved mulgas ; each one so like its fellow that if a man lost his bearings he was helpless ; in local phrase “ bushed.”

Through this eerie, inviolate region—that had neither the bloom of youth nor the maturity of age—they tramped unhurriedly, cutting sandal-wood by day, bivouacking at night under stars that flashed like cut steel. It was a solitary trade. Each man went off alone, with his axe and gun, to scour a certain area, cutting all he could find and dragging it to a central pile for collecting later on.

Except near water-holes, there was little sign of life. The natives were practically extinct. Birds were few and strange, with no music in them to enliven the ghostly silence. It was like a land under a spell—timeless, soundless, changeless. The very bushes, in their isolated stillness, seemed listening for some whisper of release from the wide, indifferent sky.

The strong, subtle charm of the place struck some secret chord in Derek's soul. Never before had he so inly felt the intrinsic majesty of stillness; yet always, behind the majesty and the charm, he was aware of a nameless fear: the fear that lurks in all desert lands; that shatters the comfortable faith of the Churches and either drives men mad or opens their eyes—and behold they see

There were bad days when he went about his work haunted by a horrid undersense of Something waiting to spring out of ambush and annihilate him. In the evenings, when they talked and smoked and cooked their simple meal, it would vanish outright, only to reappear next morning. He had said no word to the others; and in time he discovered, with exquisite relief, that it had evaporated like an evil miasma. But the eerie charm remained. The spiritual struggle had been very real, and with mastery came a curious sense of exaltation; a sense of having, indeed, overridden all boundaries and escaped out of the world into some luminous Beyond, where time and space and human limitations were not—

With Maguire it was very much otherwise. He clamoured for the mining camp, for the noise and movement, and conviviality of herded men: and at long last there came a change over the unchanging scene. The monotone of red granite was broken by dykes of schist and ironstone. Trees and grass reappeared. Clouds rolled up out of the south and rain fell. They were back in the normal world

again : and before very long they descried, afar off, a vision of tents and blazing wood fires—Bronker's Claim at last !

That night they supped and slept in camp. There was singing and laughter and lurid profanity that brought Derek to earth with a crash. And so an end of the strangest spiritual adventure that had befallen him during his brief Odyssey in search of truth.

In the unearthly stillness of the desert he had caught a glimpse of God's reality ; in the clamour of life and work on Bronker's Claim he had more than a glimpse of man's reality, with never a film of varnish to gloss its uglier aspects. Two shafts, with parallel galleries yielding five ounces to the ton, were in full swing : and Derek, consigned to the main shaft, spent most of his time shovelling broken rock into buckets, his ears and brain maddened by the eternal click of pick or hammer on stone. In the evenings there were noisy, cheerful gatherings round the camp fires ; tales of miraculous " finds " ; racy, coarse interminable talk of money and women and the drink ; talk from which a man could extract much quaint and varied knowledge of human nature in the rough.

But the work itself was back-breaking and monotonous. It lacked the one redeeming feature of farm drudgery, the sense of ministering to life : and it did not take more than a week or two for Maguire to be seized with a conviction that the wealth of Cræsus awaited them had they but the " spunk " to fling

away their "ruddy shovels" and go prospecting on their own. Derek confessed that he was heartily sick of his shovel: and Foxy Lee—after jeering at them—opined that he had best keep an eye on their movements, just to see what colour of fools they made of themselves.

So they left camp with their friend the hand-cart and wandered over the country, tapping likely rocks, "dollying" samples, and, when evening came, hunting rabbits in the bush.

Personally Derek was convinced nothing would come of it: but the adventure of the thing amused him, and Maguire's air-castles, and the businesslike intensity of Foxy Lee, who had only come out to spy on their folly.

And behold, in less than two weeks, the incredible had come to pass—

They had struck a vein of ore in one of the lesser dykes, and had heard, with unbelieving ears, Foxy's solemn declaration that he was a Dutchman if that vein didn't yield thirty ounces to the ton.

That was the prelude, merely. In less than no time their news was abroad; a fresh camp sprang up; shafts were sunk; gangs of rough, hardened workmen poured in from all over the district, and they found themselves famous. Later on, they might find themselves rich. It began to look like a big thing; and the prevailing excitement swept even Derek off his feet. He, too, ventured to build air-castles; to dream of justifying himself and his crazy adventure and giving practical proof of that

devotion to Avonleigh that lay, like a hidden jewel, in his heart ;—unexpressible, unexpressed.

But the dream dissolved in mist. The air-castles fell to earth in very dusty ruins. Too soon their vein of ore showed signs of petering out. Excitement had reached high-water mark ; and the downward swing of the pendulum had an ill-effect on the rougher element in camp. It swung them, inevitably, towards whisky—towards “ grab all you can and make tracks.” Derek had never heard so much foul language even among men who were no carpet-talkers at their best, and it sickened him. But sheer disgust of the whole thing failed to take the edge off his own keen disappointment ; and his mind reacted on his body, that now showed signs of resenting the drastic change of life and climate and food. He, who had seldom known a headache, suffered from a constant oppressive ache across his brows. A paralysing lassitude hung upon his limbs and befogged his brain. He moved like a sleep-walker through a nightmare of cursing, brawling men.

From this unnatural apathy he was roused by the discovery that he had been robbed one night of nearly half his little store of notes and gold. That fired his temper and spurred him to action.

“ I’m off out of this hell-hole, Maguire,” he said next morning after announcing his loss. “ I’ve had enough of it to last me a lifetime. Come if you like. If not, I’ll go alone.”

“ An’ where will ye be going, in the divil’s name ? ”

asked the amazed Maguire, who had so far taken the lead.

“ Anywhere—away from these drunken thieves. The coast for choice. Will you come ? ”

And Maguire—after consideration—decided that he would. A fat roll of notes was burning a hole in his pocket ; and Jamestown laid itself out for the benefit of men in that enviable condition.

So to Jamestown they returned, striking across country to the nearest railway.

It was a small prosperous place, harmless-looking enough, with its shops, hotels and drinking saloons along the shore and its dwelling-houses scattered among the sand-dunes behind. Yet here, in a few weeks, a man could experience enough to shatter any lingering faith in human nature that he might happen to possess.

A dead weight still seemed to hang on Derek's limbs and brain. For the moment he had no clear aim or plan ; only a passionate longing to go straight back to the clean, decent life of his own kind : and the sight of the sea, that should have refreshed him, only made matters worse. Maguire, it must be admitted, found him anything but a lively companion—and Maguire was “ out for a spree.” His own head being made of cast iron, he and his friends did their wel-meaning best to enliven Derek with generous doses of the foul stuff sold as whisky in the saloons of the town. It was their simple, infallible prescription for driving dull care away—

Derek looked back on those first two days at

Jamestown as on a nightmare many degrees worse than the last week in camp ; for the cogent reason that he himself had, in a measure, shared the general degradation. For forty-eight hours he was like a ship without a rudder ; his brain blurred with the fumes of drink and bewildered with the noisy hilarity of bar saloons ; his detached self, somewhere up in the clouds, looking on cynically at what men call " life."

There had been brief clear moments of exaltation and excitement. One of these had culminated in a free fight. There had also been women. . . .

Sickened by the talk of tipsy men, Derek had turned to these with something like relief, and had discovered too late the depths of his mistake—

On the third morning he awoke with a mind painfully clear and pockets painfully empty. " Dull care " had taken flight with a good many other things. The cure was complete—and lasting.

Derek hated, though he could not easily banish, the memory of those few days. He lacked Van's art of convenient forgetfulness ; and the first blot on his scutcheon was no light matter to this sturdy self-contained young Englishman, with never a trace of the Pharisee in his composition. He and his particular set at Trinity had worked and played too hard to have time or taste for emulating the " nuts " in respect of wine, women and cigars. Most of them had lived strenuously and frugally—with intervals for unlimited refreshment—and had kept straight



as a matter of course. To Mark and Derek, in particular, the traffic that makes night hideous in the streets of great cities seemed a challenge to the apostles of progress, the dreamers of dreams. For themselves, they could only resolve to try and live in line with their young, clean convictions. It is the most that the unorganized individual can do—and it is much.

Now, Maguire and Jamestown had tripped him up; and Derek was at once too honest and too proud to gloss over the unwelcome fact. In the skeleton diary of his wanderings, that he kept for reference, the three dates were bracketed together above the following entry: "Made a proper beast of myself, with M's friendly assistance. The first time. Never again if I know it. I've had my lesson. Was feeling all to pieces when I arrived. But no good whining or making excuses. Fear I didn't improve matters by slanging poor old M. when it was over. He's been reared differently. He meant no harm. Good company and a good chap, but I'm not sorry to be quit of him. I'd give all my savings and a sight more to make a bee line for home or Bombay. I've made such a rotten poor start. All the more reason I should stick it out, of course—and I will. Better luck perhaps Canada way . . ."

In that dim hope—for he had small faith in his own luck—he left Jamestown and parted from Maguire, who had struck up a violent friendship with the bar-tender and lost his heart, temporarily,

to one of "the girls." Derek did not soon forget him ; but he never heard of him again.

By coasting steamer and rail he made his way back to Adelaide, and there squandered all that was left from the wreck on a second-class ticket to Vancouver. That wonderful voyage across the Pacific should, at least, be made in cleanliness and comparative comfort. His familiar Norfolk coat and flannels helped him soon to feel more like himself again ; and even to review, with a queer, detached interest, the doings of one Derek Blunt on the Continent of Australia.

Before him lay Canada, land of boundless possibilities ; a name to conjure with. His own possibilities, of course, were strictly limited. Canada, like Australia, would have no use for all the varied knowledge he had imbibed at Oxford. Her first question would not be "Who are you ?" or "Who was your grandfather ?" but "What can you do ?" By his practical answer to that a man must stand or fall out here in the West. Here the side issues of his former life—"Rugger," riding and shooting—were assets of real value, because they put grit into a man ; and he cherished in his letter-case a certificate from the friendly Australian farmer—an asset of greater value than all. He had a vague idea of trying to get work on a prairie homestead, so as to learn a little more about practical farming. He had also a vague idea that prairie homesteads did not grow wild along the coast of British Columbia : an idea confirmed by a fellow-passenger who hailed

from Vancouver, and by his own first sight of that imposing coast line:—sharply jagged mountainous fiords and inlets, mantled everywhere with mighty forests that swept darkly down to the tideway and were streaked at intervals with narrow lanes, like partings in a thick head of hair.

“That’s whar hand-loggers have bin at work,” his new friend told him. “Logging’s the soundest proposition around here, take my word. No shakes though, foolin’ with agents. Yew come along with me to a slap-up logging hotel whar I’m known, and I guess I’ll soon put you in the way of a start.”

Derek was to learn that this friendly spirit, this readiness to give any stray or stranded human a helping hand, is the spirit of Canada at her best: and for that alone he must have loved her because of the same streak in himself.

It was in that “slap-up” logging hotel that he had met Abe Callander, and so eventually had cast anchor in Number One Camp. For once in a way “The Luck” had smiled on him, and, taking one thing with another, she seemed disposed to smile on him still—

The long ride, the silent companionship of Kitts and the forest, had almost charmed away his mood of depression: and when at last the full glory of lake and mountain burst upon his view, it slunk off altogether for very shame. On such a day and in such surroundings, he must be a churl, or the saddest man alive, who could feel at odds with creation. Derek, being neither, shook himself mentally, and defied Mrs. Maggots or Symes to spoil his brief holiday.

### CHAPTER III

“ We can never attain complete success in this quest, but we can always be advancing to clearer knowledge.”—

*The True Sceptic.*

THE railway siding that was Derek's objective consisted of a narrow platform and a shack in charge of one “ Scotty,” a well-known local character, whose chief duty, in his own phrase, was “ to see that they planks an' they ties<sup>1</sup> dinna rin aff thegither the nicht.” Incidentally, he imbibed enough whisky most nights to ensure unbroken slumber, though the heavens fell. Derek thoroughly enjoyed a yarn with the old sinner while waiting ; and on these occasions Kitts was always left in his charge.

In the courteous little train that halted “ by request ” at the siding, passengers were few, and chiefly connected with Windyridge Mine. But in the steamer it was otherwise ; and the crowd was quite promiscuous ; for Canadian steamers are no respecters of persons. Officially there was one class, by courtesy called “ first.” Humanly there were many classes ; and these crystallized automatically

<sup>1</sup> Sleepers.

into sharply divided groups. Man may rhapsodize about equality, world without end. Nature, in her wisdom, will have none of it : and " though you drive Nature out with a pitchfork, she always comes running back."

The miners from Windyridge, four large handsome Swedes, joined a party of their own kind from the Slocan. In that group the bottle and snatches of song circulated freely. In the commercial group—clean shaven and prosperous—talk took the place of drink ; talk of deals and commissions and " sure things " ; and through it all ran the deliberate, drawling cadence of a very American voice, insisting on the vital importance of closer trade relations between " Canada and the You-nited States." Canada and the States, he declared with emphatic iteration, were natural born twins ; gee-ography gave Amurrica the pull all the time, and she wasn't such a blamed fool as to quarrel with the sitewation. . . .

A lesser group, farther astern, was obviously British. It kept very much to itself, and its talk was of fruit-farming interlarded with home politics. Derek knew two of the men by sight ; retired Army officers, who wore their rough clothes " with a difference." They were listening with slightly bored amusement to a young Englishman evidently new to the West and disgruntled by Canada's blunt demand that the man who aspires to earn her dollars shall put his back into the process. As that part of the programme did not appear to suit him, he was

indulging in the cheap retort of the ineffectual: "No damned use for this beastly country, or these upstart Colonials who have the cheek to treat one as an equal. No place for a gentleman . . ." and so forth.

He did not seem to care who overheard these praiseworthy remarks; and they maddened Derek, who knew something, of the extent to which his beloved country was being discredited by this kind of talk.

He avoided the group, partly because of his annoyance, partly because he preferred smoking and listening and enjoying the evening glory of lake and mountain, to which his fellow passengers paid no heed. For most of them—as he very well knew—this majestic region, which they farmed and mined and prospected, was simply so much potential lumber and "canned stuff," "white coal" and raw mineral wealth.

But if they cared nothing for the eternal hills, neither did the hills care one jot for their pigmy activities and pre-occupations. On either side of that narrow, winding lake they towered—aloof, savage, resplendent; heights piled on heights to the ultimate snow line: a very ocean of mountains; so fierce, so remote, so utterly untamed by man. Here the blue sheen of a glacier, there a fang-like peak, splashed and streaked with snow. Round the next bend a rocky bluff darkly crowned with forest; and lower down, on more shelving slopes, the fairy mantle of trees in new leaf. Lower still, in coves

and lake-side ranches, the transient snow of orchards, the first prim, ordered patches of tilled land in this unfettered region of earth. And down, fathoms down, in the blue-green waters, a crystal-clear inverted vision of more crags, more bluffs, more splashes of new leaf and blossom.

Through that inverted vision the busy little steamer nosed its way; stopping here to deliver, there to pick up, letters, parcels or freight; while the miners boozed and the American argued, and the snows began to take colour and the shadows deepened from purple to black; and Derek fell into casual talk with a tough grizzled lumberman, full of yarns and grievances about "graft" and "political pull" that closed great tracts of country against bona fide loggers for the profit of the mere speculator—

Derek decided for the fiftieth time that a Lake steamer was an ideal form of locomotion. He was in no hurry to reach the landing stage for Beulah Ranch; yet it would be very pleasant to see them all again; to enjoy, even for one night, the seemly securities, the good familiar sense of Home. His connexion with Macrae's dated from early autumn. There had been a slack time in the camps; and, instead of "blowing in" his wages at Vancouver, he had spent two months on Macrae's small prosperous ranch, fruit-picking and making himself generally useful about the homestead. Symes, rather to his surprise, had followed suit for a month; and this was the manner of their mutual introduction to Lois Aymes.

She was a refined, fragile-looking creature, with red-gold hair and engaging ways ; the nearest thing to a lady that Derek had encountered since leaving home. Her position at Macrae's was a cross between lady help and nursery governess to two children aged five and seven. Derek often wondered how much she taught them. She seemed little more than a child herself ; so ill-suited to the rough and tumble of Canadian life. Her chief interests appeared to be reading novels and passing the time with one or another of the men on the ranch. This was natural enough and probably harmless enough ; though for the girl's sake, Derek would have liked to feel more certain of that last. Symes had not stayed long enough to be of any account. It was Jos Agar, one of the foremen, who had chiefly roused Derek's distrust. He was a big powerful fellow, rough-mannered with his mates, but soft-spoken when he chose : the type of man who can be trusted to get the maximum out of a woman with a minimum of effort. That he fascinated Lois had long been apparent to every one, himself included ; and there was intermittent chaff about the affair ; but no one seemed to give it a serious thought. Derek—as a mere onlooker—saw elements of tragedy in it, whether Agar married the girl or not ; and this invested her with a touch of pathos in his eyes. It seemed to him that she realized he was different ; and her confiding ways gave him much the same pleasant thrill as when Bill Margett or 'Salie Macrae slipped a clinging hand into his own. So, to her shy



advances, he had responded in his reserved, unhurried fashion ; and before he returned to camp an easy friendliness had sprung up between them.

Since then he had paid brief visits to the Ranch whenever opportunity permitted ; and occasionally she wrote to him ; untidy, impulsive notes, giving him news of them all. In these notes Agar was rarely mentioned ; and the last one, received a few days ago, ended with the childish appeal : " Do come along this way soon and liven us up. All the fruit trees are out and it's like fairy land. I hate giving lessons this weather. And the children hate them worse than I do. 'Salie sends a kiss. Suppose I can only send regards ! Very sincerely, Lois Aymes."

That note set him wondering—had Agar sheered off and was she feeling bored in consequence ? Well—he would soon know now. It eased his sense of separation to feel he had a real link with the homely human interest of it all—

The sky was flushed with the aftermath of sunset and the waters had taken on a purple sheen when the steamer ran alongside Beulah Landing to set him ashore. Macrae's homestead was little more than a mile inland : and very soon Derek was in the Ranch itself. His road ran along a strip of high ground sloping away, on either hand, to long lines of pear, plum, and cherry trees in full bloom. It was like fairyland, as Lois had said. No wonder

she hated giving lessons. She ought still to be learning them—

A little farther on, he halted and stood looking down at it all. . . .

Suddenly he became aware of a shadow moving between the trees ; and as it emerged into a clearer space, he discovered it to be a man and woman so closely linked that they made one outline. Their backs were towards him ; and, with a distinctly unpleasant shock he recognized them—Agar and Lois Aymes. The man's arm was round her and her uncovered head rested against him. In the open, Derek could distinguish details ; the gleam of her hair, the tilt of her slim body towards him. And while he watched, they came to a standstill, as if in earnest talk. Then, impulsively, Lois turned to Agar, her head flung backward, her face lifted to his—

And Derek, with a tingling, uncomfortable revulsion of feeling, turned sharply away.

What did it all amount to ? He challenged Agar mentally as he strode on through the gathering dusk. If things were above board it meant—marriage : but the chances were even that it meant nothing of the kind. Symes' detestable remark came back to him now and the sneer in his tone that seemed to ask, " Which of us was right ? " Well, if it were so, who had encouraged her taste for kisses ? And Mrs. Macrae ought to keep stricter watch over a girl like that in a world of rough, careless men : though in truth the good soul had more than enough to occupy her from morning till night.

As he stepped on to the rose-covered veranda, she welcomed him with her large smile and possessive grip : a brisk, capable woman in the middle thirties ; candid, yet good natured, and of curiously unfeminine outline. All her bones seemed a size too large. Her shoulders were square. Her hips had no alluring curves. Her face was the shape of a friendly brick, and much the same colour, set with a pair of very blue eyes. Her cheap print "shirt-waist" was finished with a man's collar and tie ; and her ill-cut tweed skirt bore the hall-mark "home-made." Withal, she managed to produce a general impression of comeliness that possibly emanated from within. "I'm made square and I act square," she would tell you with her smiling candour. And it was true. With the help of one inestimable Chinaman, she did all her own house-work, washing and baking ; yet generally found leisure to be at ease with her sewing from five o'clock onward. Derek had taken a liking to her from the first, and she frankly returned the compliment. He often longed to send a snapshot of her to Van as an interesting specimen of a fine, manly woman. He had fitful spells of longing for Van, whose sense of humour covered more sins than even charity's capacious cloak.

"It's real good to see you again," said the manly woman with patient sincerity. "I've kept a nice bit of supper hot. And d'you suppose that young scapegrace, Al, would go to bed till you'd come? Not he ! They're off somewhere just now. They all skedaddled after supper. Guess Lois has her eye

on them. The spring's gone to her head some. But she's not been looking quite so dandy lately. Her cough worries her."

Still talking, she vanished into the kitchen, and reappeared with a bowl of soup and a half-demolished meat pie. These she supplemented with home-made bread, cheese, waffles, maple syrup and a bottle of light beer.

Then she sat down by him, a rough stocking over one hand, a dagger-like needle in the other. The supper-table was set across one end of the living-room. At the other end, a few comfortable cane chairs, a round table and a hired cottage piano were grouped about the stove. Macrae himself, a hard-headed, hard-drinking Scot, lived chiefly in his office, where, at present, he and a few congenial spirits were playing "slough." His family would probably see nothing of him the whole evening.

And, while Derek did full justice to his belated meal, and the darning needle stabbed 'Salie's stocking, Mrs. Macrae's flow of talk took on a more confidential tone. Lois seemed rather on her mind.

"She did oughter marry, that girl," was her sage conclusion; and Derek opined that the odds seemed in favour of it.

"She's full young, though, isn't she?" he added, helping himself to more pie.

"Just turned twenty," Mrs. Macrae informed him with a side-long glance of which he was placidly unaware. "Plenty girls marry earlier than that; and she's a lone thing, poor dear! No belongings on

earth but a stepmother, who nags her life out because she's soft and feckless. But she's a dear lovable girl, if she *is* a shade too partial to a story book and an armchair. Fact is, she wasn't reared to earn her living. Her poor father never thought she'd need. For she's of good stock, Derek Blunt. Her dead mother was my first cousin. That's really how she's here: and she does her best, poor child. But, as I say, she'd ought to marry a man that'll take her to the Old Country or the Island. She's not fit for this life. And work's not her line. The man's her line: and mebbe that's about the best you can say of a woman."

"Yes—perhaps—if she hits on the right one."

"Well—I guess she will—if he gives her half a chance."

A lurking significance in her tone prompted Derek to ask frankly: "You don't mean Agar?"

The note of disapproval was unmistakable and she misread it utterly.

"Sakes, no! Not much 'right man' about Jos. They've been fooling round some. Young folks will. But there's nothing *to* it. You can take my word. Jos isn't the kind to marry. He can get all he wants without that. And Lois, well—she fancies him some. But—my! if men and women had a call to marry all those they'd fancied, we'd need to be Turks and Mormons outright to keep the accounts square! Don't *you* worry. If Lois is a mite feckless and young of her age she's a good girl—a *good* girl." Mrs. Macrae repeated with what seemed to Derek

unnecessary emphasis. And he perceived, with a jarring shock, that the kind soul was by way of administering comfort to a discouraged lover. The discovery, following upon his recent vision, fired him with an insane desire to bolt before Lois Aymes appeared. He plunged desperately into disjointed talk about his journey; and thanked heaven when the vagrant children charged into the room and took complete possession of him. But respite was brief; for Al had long overstayed his bed-time and now his mother was adamant. No more excuses; he must go.

"Delek, too," the boy whimpered, clinging to his friend. "Want Delek to tuck me in."

"Sure thing, old chap. I'll tuck you in, if you don't kick up a fuss," Derek reassured him soothingly.

"Well—of all the spoilt boys!"

The speaker was not Mrs. Macrae; and Derek looked up with a slight start. There, in the veranda doorway, stood Lois Aymes. . . . Framed in a background of summer darkness, with the light full upon her hair, she looked even fairer and more fragile than usual; and as much out of place in the Wild West as a lily of the valley in a cabbage patch. She wore a simple gown of dull blue linen with a quaker collar that revealed the swanlike curve of her throat. But the long lines of her figure were too immature and slender for grace. Her cheekbones, that were a shade too prominent, narrowed unexpectedly to the oval of her chin; and in the hollows beneath them were patches of clear

carmine. Her eyes had a deceptive far-away look ; and the chief charm of her face lay in the mobility of her softly sensuous mouth.

Though she apostrophized the boy, her welcoming smile was for Derek, who returned it with a touch of constraint.

"So you really *have* come," she began, "I wondered——"

"Well, if you wondered you might have come along sooner to find out," Mrs. Macrae took her up with a touch of asperity. "And you'd ought to bin minding the kids. After dark, too! What kept you so late?"

Derek, aware of her faint hesitation, hated himself for knowing the truth and knowing that she would conceal it.

"I got walking too far on the Ranch," she said rather hurriedly. "It was lovely among the trees. I didn't notice how the time went. Then I had to hurry back. I didn't mean any harm. I'm sorry. Come along, Al."

But Al clung stoutly to Derek. "Please—you put me *all* to bed," he began coaxingly ; and Derek jumped at the heaven-sent chance of escape.

"Blest if I won't !" he cried, and swung the small boy up on to his shoulder. "Don't say 'No' to us, Mrs. Macrae. Promise I won't stay fooling with him. And I'm sure Miss Lois is tired after her walk." So between them they carried the day.

When he returned Lois was at the piano, crooning a love song ; Mrs. Macrae engaged with the inevit-

able stocking, and Rosalie, curled up on the cane settee, clasping the Halma board, obviously awaiting him. She was a thin over-grown child ; not pretty, though fresh coloured, with her mother's eyes and crisp brown hair. But Derek was quite uncritical over children. In the rare cases when they were obnoxious, he unwaveringly set it down to their elders.

“ Let's play ‘ Stalking, ’ ” she whispered as he sat down by her. “ Stalking ” was a game invented by Derek one evening because the rules of Halma were beyond her. His solitary piece was “ The Enemy, ” her nine were the Bold Bad Brigands ; and the enemy stalked them. If they were not very careful he captured them. For 'Salie the game never lost its thrill ; partly because Derek never played down to her. He stalked her without mercy ; never merely allowed her to win ; so that her few victories were genuine triumphs.

And while they played, Lois, at the piano, was singing : “ Oh come, my love—Oh come, my love, with me ”—in tones so frankly sentimental that Derek felt quite uncomfortable. The recollection of Mrs. Macrae's discreet encouragement did not serve to mend matters. The wretched business had quite spoilt his holiday. He had meant to stay over Sunday night. Instead, he would cross to Nealston that afternoon. If Lois Aymes should happen to suspect Mrs. Macrae's latest scheme for her future welfare the position would become intolerable.

She had left the piano now and was standing close



to him, watching their game. "How can you keep on at such nonsense?" she suddenly remarked.

"It's not nonsense," Derek answered without looking up. "It's a rattling good game.—Look out, 'Salie, or I'll have you."

But 'Salie, with a squeak of triumph, escaped out of the toils:—and the game went on.

After a short silence Lois spoke again. "Have you nearly finished? It's long past her bedtime. You *do* spoil them——"

But 'Salie clutched the board with both hands. "Oh, we must finish—we must! Mother, mayn't we? I still *can* corner him."

"Well, be quick about it," Mrs. Macrae answered with surface severity; and for once Derek was guilty of conniving at the process. At parting the child flung her arms round him and pressed a flushed cheek against his cool one. "I *do* love you," she whispered. Then she ran off and Lois took her place. This time there was no concentration on the game. Lois looked much more often at Derek than at the board; and when he beat her hollow, she simply laughed and said: "Try again."

In a general way their game would be enlivened by snatches of mild chaff; but to-night he was acutely aware of Mrs. Macrae, in the background, putting a wrong colour on his innocent remarks. Nor were matters improved when Lois began to look pathetic and tried to catch his eyes between the moves. If she had Agar, why did she bother about himself, he wondered with masculine density.

Once Mrs. Macrae left the room for a few minutes and Lois gave the board a little petulant push.

"It's a fool game. I'm sick of it."

"That's all right," Derek said, smiling and sweeping up the scattered pieces. "I like straight speaking."

"Do you?" she gave him a shy look. "Well then—what's the matter with you to-night?"

This was more than he had bargained for, but he managed to keep his countenance. "Nothing. Sorry I've bored you. I suppose I'm in a stupid mood."

"You didn't seem to be—with 'Salie. I believe you care for those children more than anything."

He smiled at that. "I can always hit it off with children."

"And I s'pose—not being a child, I'm not in it!"

"You don't seem to me much more than a child," he said in a tone he would not have ventured on with Mrs. Macrae sitting behind him.

"Don't I? Well I *am*—lots more." The toss of her head, and the young importance of her tone made the scene in the orchard seem more like an optical illusion than ever. "Say, it's stupid sitting here. Let's walk in the veranda. There's a moon and the honeysuckle's just sweet."

At any other time, to please her, he would have consented. But to-night he did not dare. "Better not," he said, "you look tired this evening."

She glanced at him through the curtain of her long straight lashes; red-gold like her hair.

"That's just an excuse. You're cross with me."

"Honour bright, I'm not. But we can talk quite as well sitting here; and I'll try not to be stupid any more."

"Well, talk then! We won't make a fool pretence at playing Halma. I *am* rather tired. P'raps it's the spring——"

At that moment Mrs. Macrae came back into the room; and by the end of the evening his impulse not to stay over Sunday had hardened into a decision.

Next morning when Lois took him out to see her "fairyland," she had an inspiration.

"Let's have a supper picnic out here to-night. You ask her. She never says 'No' to you."

This was disconcerting; but Derek was not easily swayed from his purpose. "I would, like a shot," he said smiling at her eagerness, "but I can't stay. I've too much business to get through on the other side."

It hurt him to see her face fall and her soft mouth quiver like the mouth of a chidden child.

"Well, you *are*——"

"Oh no, I'm not!" he rallied her: but her disappointment was too keen to be laughed off.

"Then what makes you seem so different, and go rushing off like this? No one 'ud reckon we're s'posed to be friends——"

"We are though, real friends," Derek seized upon that safe and blessed word. "I can't make talk and say pretty things. But if I could ever help

you—if you were ever in trouble—then you'd know——”

He broke off rather lamely, and she sighed. “ Oh, I do know. You're real kind, and—you're fine. But it's not much shakes being friends, if it's only—when you're in trouble——”

“ It's not only then,” Derek consoled her gently. It was all so young that he began to feel a fool for running away from her. “ But it's then you can tell the real thing from the sham.”

“ Yes, I guess that's so,” she admitted without enthusiasm. “ But I *do* want that picnic. It was such a notion, and the kids would love it.”

That last shook his resolve a moment. Possibly she knew it would.

“ We'll save it up for next time,” he began.

“ Next time there'll be mosquitoes and no cherry blows. This time's the only time—for anything.”

“ That's philosophy ! ” Then he too had his inspiration. “ Look here, why not middle day? Sandwiches and fruit and things. Just you and I and the imps. Better than nothing. I'll fix it up. You leave it to me.”

She was radiant. He had not disappointed her ; yet he had managed to hold his ground. For a reputed muddler, he considered he had done rather well. Of course it would confirm Mrs. Macrae in her crazy notions ; but if he kept away long enough, afterwards, that would die a natural death. And Agar might play up. There was no knowing.

Meantime, why shouldn't the children enjoy their picnic?

They did enjoy it, all four of them to the top of their bent; and later in the afternoon Derek departed with their shrill insistent: "Come along again soon," sounding pleasantly in his ears.

And he could not come along again soon—bad luck to it—simply because Lois Aymes was not the child he had taken her for, and Mrs. Macrae was bitten with the matchmaking instinct of her kind. No escape, even in the wilds, from the woman complication, which did not seem to him by any means the first consideration in life. And if a man had no hankering after that sort of thing, why on earth couldn't the women leave him alone? It was confoundedly annoying; the more so that, in his reserved fashion, he had grown fond of the girl. He was haunted uncomfortably by her pathetic look at parting and the clinging clasp of her hand; haunted still more by the fear that Agar, being what he was, she might be in trouble sooner than she dreamed. Her very weakness made an irresistible appeal to his strength. But as to falling in love——! In the circumstances it would be a disaster. Moreover, it had never entered his head. Very good reasons, both, why it must not be allowed to enter hers.

"And that's an end of *that*," he reflected ruefully as he leaned upon the taffrail, smoking and staring down into blue-green unfathomable depths.

By the time he reached his hotel in Nealston, the

morning's cloud of depression had returned ; and with it the craving to get away, to be himself again.

The girl at the bureau smiled a friendly greeting and handed him a letter from Bombay ; for the Hotel was his official address whence correspondence was forwarded on. Though unpretentious, it was thoroughly comfortable, with a good cuisine. He allowed himself, on these occasions, the luxury of a decent dinner, a bottle of wine, Home papers and a real armchair. He found that abstinence rather increased than diminished his appreciation of these things. To-day he went straight up to his room, and established himself on the strip of balcony with his letter and his "Weekly Times." Lord Avonleigh seldom wrote long letters, and this one was shorter than usual. It was also rather more intimate than usual, which increased the restless craving at his heart.

"MY DEAR BOY," he wrote,—

"I haven't much time this morning, but I can't let this mail go without sending you word of us, as I know from experience that any sort of letter is welcome when one is quite cut off from the things of Home. I may add that occasional letters, from your end are very welcome, also, and it is a long time since one came our way. Aunt Marion—who is very fond of you—suffers from periodical qualms as to what you may be up to. It would be an act of real consideration to keep her posted up a little oftener. And though Mother may not say very much, the same remark applies to her. I am philo-

sophic enough to accept the fact that silence probably means all is well ; but I admit that a sight of your handwriting would give me great pleasure. We have good news from home. Things seem to be going well and young Schonberg turning out a success. I have now every hope of persuading Mother and Van to come out in October and spend the winter here. A pity you can't complete the party. But no doubt you are well occupied solving your own problems and imbibing first-hand knowledge ! An ounce of it is worth a ton of the other kind, and I appreciate your constancy of purpose. Some day, God willing, we shall see you again. At any rate let us hear from you.

“ Your affectionate father,

“ AVONLEIGH.”

Derek brooded a long while over that letter, which so vividly brought before him his father's keen face and hawk-like eyes. Not a word about himself or his health. So like him ! Still more like him the friendly dig about first-hand knowledge, that might or might not contain an undernote of sarcasm. The touch about constancy of purpose rang true and warmed his heart. But—judged by results, what did that constancy amount to after all ?

Not for the first time, a chill trickle of doubt ran through him :—Was he doing any earthly good to himself or any one else by this freak of “ bucking ” and “ under-cutting ” in a lumber camp ? Or was he simply wasting three of the best years of his life ?

He had felt so splendidly sure when he took the plunge—and what had come of it?

Certainly he had solved no problems; though he had gleaned some strange and varied knowledge—for what it was worth—of human nature in the rough. He had learnt to see his England through other than English eyes; to regard her, perhaps, more critically yet with a deeper pride in all that she stood for, wherever her spirit held sway over the minds of men. In Australia and Canada he had come to know her as never at Oxford or Avonleigh; for great striving countries should be seen from afar if we would have them in the pure idea. As for getting into closer touch with the men of another social order, he had at least got sufficiently inside that problem to discover its immensity; to realize that the thing could not be achieved in eighteen months of casual labour: possibly, not in half a lifetime. If so—where, in the name of common sense, was the use of hanging on? And as to constancy of purpose—was not sheer obstinacy nearer the mark? There spoke the voice of the tempter: and in the hope of silencing it, Derek glanced again at his father's letter.

One sentence leaped from the page: "I have now every hope of persuading Mother and Van to come out in October. . . . A pity you can't complete the party." In October they would all be together having no end of a good time; while he, self-banished, would be picking somebody's blasted fruit or working at the mills. There was no earthly sense in it. All the old jars and rubs



seemed at this distance, of a transient insignificance beside his deep-rooted love of them all, the stir of kindred blood in his veins—

And suddenly it flashed upon him that by October two years would be up. He had said—"two at least; three at most." Let him stick it out till October; then honour—and obstinacy—would be satisfied. After that, if his father rose to the idea of Trevanyon, he could put in his third year on a farm, and pull it through cheerfully with a genuine object in view. His flagging spirits went up with a run. He would say nothing yet awhile. Like Stevenson's lantern-bearers, he would keep his new-lighted hope buttoned up under his coat; and be content to know that it was there. A little nearer the time, he would write and announce his intention of coming to complete the party.

He was seized with boyish impatience. Six months seemed suddenly an eternity to wait. Anything might happen. Certainly nothing worth mentioning had happened in the past twelve; but now—Fate might have some horrid upheaval up her sleeve. Derek had no faith in Fate. She was his sworn enemy. But he would not be frightened into ignominious surrender. He had made up his mind to wait till the two years were up—and wait he would: Let her do her damndest!

Six months! A mere bagatelle! They would be gone in no time.

Meanwhile—he was hungry and thirsty and thoroughly in the mood for a good dinner.

## CHAPTER IV

“ We who make  
Sport for the gods, are hunted to the end.”—BROWNING.

**B**ACK in camp, with a secret lantern buttoned under his coat, Derek put worries behind him and settled down to his logging again with a will. Abe had a big contract on hand ; and for the next month or two they would be working at high pressure. From morning to night forest and clearing resounded with the ringing notes of axes on wood, clatter of steel cables and the crash of falling trees. Some nights they worked overtime by flare, while the pines performed a ghostly shadow dance around them, and the large, friendly figure of “ Maggots ” prowled among them with his war-cry : “ Get *to* it, boys ! Get to it all the time ! ”

And what blessed dreamless sleep was the guerdon of their health-giving toil ! Better than town work any day. Clean Nature all about you. Her tempers to put up with : rain, wind and snow, black-fly and mosquitoes. Her strength to pit your own against, in place of the frauds and jealousies of men. Work that called for endurance, for the triple dex-

terity of hand, eye and brain ; and, by supper-time, made a man " feel good all over," at peace with himself and his kind. In these early summer days, when the whole camp was putting its collective back into Abe's big thing, and Abe was sending up word that they were " the straight goods every man jack of them," and the sun shone and the chipmunks chirruped, Derek felt more keenly alive, than ever before, to all that most satisfied him in the surroundings and the life. Every day, some urgent and interesting task on hand ; sheer athletic pleasure in the effortless swing of an axe, or the movement of a saw ; the flattering knowledge that one's scrap of work counted, because, in this vast world of logs and loggers, trees were more plentiful than men. And above all he liked the spirit of the thing ; the friendliness that would go a long way round to give one of the boys a hand ; the unflinching spirit that would admit no " ifs " or " buts " ; that bade a man stand up to difficulties and ply his native common sense if he desired to win the respect of his fellows and to keep his job :—in brief, the spirit of the West. The essence of that spirit had been rubbed into Derek, at the start, by big, kindly Mick Sayers, brother to Dan. " Don't you never let on you can't do this nor that," had been his private word of warning. " You go right ahead every time. Use yer own horse sense an' leave the boss to do the worryin' " :—which sound advice, boldly acted on, had pulled Derek round more than one critical corner.

Mick himself was a skilled woodsman, close on

thirty; and Derek found his untiring Canadian vigour as good as a tonic. At the moment he was "under-cutting"; and Derek, on his return, was asked to take over the vacancy left by Symes, whom the merciful "Maggots" had merely shifted on to less skilled work. This meant seeing more of Mick, an arrangement thoroughly congenial to them both.

Altogether things were going so well with him in his cheerful corner of the world that he began to grow less distrustful of Fate—

The Sunday following his trip he devoted to Home letters; a long one to his father, that gave a pleasing general impression of his well-being, and promised Aunt Marion more frequent assurances that he was quite prosaically safe and keeping clear of scrapes.

If he vouchsafed them few facts, he rarely indulged in gratuitous fiction; and at that moment his sense of well-being was genuine enough. It was late afternoon and most of the boys were congregated in the store. Derek was alone in the forest, about a mile from the clearing, sitting in a canvas chair, a camp table at his elbow and close behind him a very small, very rough log cabin, built with his own hands and afterwards contended for with all the quiet doggedness that was in him.

His trick of disappearing on Sundays, or in the summer evenings, had first roused curiosity, then suspicion. Then some one had spied on him and explored. Derek firmly believed it was Symes or Moulin, the French Canadian—a bully and some-

thing of a brute. The result had been the discovery and wrecking of his cherished retreat. There was nothing vicious about the proceedings. To them it was simply inconceivable that any sane man should want to be "so damned private." Wherefore they had registered their protest by demolishing his shelter and using it to feed camp fires.

Derek had been furiously angry. But he had hardened his heart; and slowly, secretly, built it up again, elsewhere. Again it had been discovered and wrecked—undoubtedly by Moulin and a few others of his kind. This time Derek's anger was white hot; but his Winchester training told. They should not have the satisfaction of seeing how enraged he was—how disheartened! He had no idea how long they were prepared to keep up the argument; but he would not be the first to give in. If he was up against the Western spirit, they were up against the British spirit; and it takes "some" beating, as they were presently to admit.

For Derek had very secretly removed the ruins of his little shack to yet another spot; and had rebuilt it, for the third time, under the outspread wing of a red cedar, within sound of a waterfall whose unceasing music never wearied his ears. And there the argument ended—to his immense relief.

He discovered, afterwards, that he owed a good deal to the championship of Mick and Joe Smithers, the cheery little Cockney, who had christened him "No—yer don't," and had an absent-minded way of calling him "sir" that went to Derek's heart.

By now the whole affair was ancient history ; and he enjoyed his spells of solitude unchallenged. He could even invite a congenial spirit to share it and sample his cocoa ; for he kept a small store of things there under lock and key ; and bounded in that friendly nutshell, counted himself a king of infinite space—

That week's mail had brought a letter from Jack, enjoying Sandhurst, with the Indian Cavalry in view ; and hostile as ever to the Schonberg connexion that had long since become an accomplished fact. Burltons Ltd. was steadily coming to the fore in the steel and iron and motor world. Schonberg, it seemed, had graciously deprecated any change in the title of the firm, but the ungrateful Jack tactlessly demanded to know how much English money there was in the concern ; how many German shareholders ; how many Germans on the board—

“ The old man's as close as an oyster on the subject,” he complained to Derek, his sole confidant. “ He evidently considers that sort of thing outside my mental grasp. But as I'm heir to Burltons (that was) I maintain I've the right to know something about it. Old Schonberg's awfully friendly. The kids are getting quite fond of him. But I can't cotton to him and I fancy he knows it. So it's not much sport going home these days, and Gay is still stuck out in Canada. Her aunt wants to take her West for a spell before letting her go home. She says it's great ; and why don't I come out and try my hand at ranching and we'd run the thing together.

Rather sport ! I'd love to have a look round and get a sight of your good old phiz again."

The letter ended with a flagrant outburst of affection, which an isolated Derek no longer quarrelled with, as in the old days. If he still remained mildly sceptical, it was the not unnatural outcome of his home atmosphere : and his patent failure to win close to his mother's heart. Yet, now he had removed himself to the ends of the earth, even she seemed to care a little what became of him. The knowledge was distinctly comforting ; though there were ungracious moods in which he wondered how long her solicitude would outlast his return home—?

Another Sunday came round—and still no word from the Ranch. Derek began to feel worried. It was not his habit to write to Lois unless she wrote to him. But he now arrived at wondering if he had better not drop a hint of warning to Mrs. Macrae. Only the embarrassing nature of their last talk withheld him. His action would certainly be misunderstood, and after all the affair was none of his business, which common-sense consideration did not prevent that disturbing vision in the orchard from haunting his brain—

The following Sunday, mindful of his promise to Bill, he begged leave to take the boy down for a jaunt on the Lake, returning Monday : and it is a question which of them most keenly enjoyed the trip. Derek felt a brief pang when they passed Beulah Landing. 'Salie and Al would be much

better for Bill than "the Pictures" at Nealston. But even while he debated the possibility—his chance was gone. Well, perhaps there would be news when he got back—

And it was so.

They reached camp about noon ; and Derek went straight to the shack. There they found Mrs. Margett alone ; and while the child poured out his tale, the woman gave Derek an odd searching look.

"You've not been to the Ranch then?" she asked ; and Derek, resenting the question, answered casually. "No. It wasn't in the programme."

Again that odd look. "Then I s'pose—you've not heard the news?"

"*What* news?"

"Oh—there's been no end of a commotion——" She glanced at Bill ; took him by the shoulders and put him from her, not ungently. "Scoot old man," she said. "Wash and brush up for dinner. I've got business with Mr. Blunt."

When they were alone Mrs. Margett took an envelope from her desk and handed it to Derek.

"For you," she said, "from Mrs. Macrae. That girl you're so keen about has given them all a fright. Been at death's door with hæmorrhage. Seems she's pulled round this time ; but of course——"

A gesture conveyed the hopelessness of it all ; and she added more feelingly : "I was afraid—if you hadn't bin there—it would give you a bit of a knock."



Derek set his lips and looked out of the window. Her insinuation passed clean over him.

"It's *cruel*," he said in a repressed voice. "Can they do nothing for her—nothing?"

Mrs. Margett shrugged. "That depends.—The Doc. seems to think the trouble's gone pretty far. But he says she'd do better up at Windyridge. That's how Mrs. Macrae wrote to me. If she's well enough the Doc. will bring her along next week, when he comes to sniff round the camps; and they want I should give her a shake-down for one night, so he can take her on next day. That's all I know. Likely Mrs. Macrae has told *you* a good bit more."

"Yes—of course," Derek assented absently, looking at his envelope. Then he turned to go.

"Won't you stay dinner?" she asked.

"No, thanks."

But she could not let him go without asserting herself. "Poor old son," she said, and caressingly touched his shoulder. "Lucky you've not let yourself in. But don't let it down you as bad as all that!"

"*Me?*" he turned sharply, withdrawing his shoulder from her hand. "I was thinking—of her."

She threw up her head and laughed. "That's *one* way of putting it. Guess you're the limit, Derek Blunt. I don't know what to make of you."

"Hard lines," he said quietly, and went out, leaving her to make of him what she pleased.

It was twenty minutes yet to the dinner hour. The men were still at work, and the bunk house

would be empty. There, seated on a log, with the sun streaming in upon him, he opened Mrs. Macrae's letter. It was a long one and it spared him nothing. They had all been frightened. Lois had been mortally frightened.

"Seems like a kind of judgment on her, poor dear ——" she rambled on, confident of his sympathy, his desire to hear all. "For she'd been out late again once or twice. She's getting bad that way. It won't do. But what's that matter now? The Doc. says he gives her six months. And whatever I did, I was not to let her know. But that bad child, 'Salie, heard him; not understanding, of course. And what does she do but tell the poor girl—' The Doc. says he gives you six months. What's he mean, Miss Aymes?' I could almost have twisted her neck, though she *is* my flesh and blood. Poor Lois went all white and fainted slap off. And she's been that queer ever since, kind of locked up herself. I can do nothing with her. I believe she's scared. Only she won't speak. And there's more ailing her than her lungs. Jos came around to see her when she was better; and the Lord knows what he said, but it knocked her flat again. I s'pose he *did* mean marriage, and now he's backed out. It's cruel hard on the poor child. But the Doc. says she's pulled around wonderful and he'll take her up to Windy-ridge next week. Mrs. Wilkins up thar is a good soul. She'll do the best any mortal can. When you see Lois, try and put some heart into her. Maybe she'll come unlocked for you. She thinks the

world of you, Derek Blunt. You won't mind if I say that now. But you'd no eyes. You're too modest by half. And now—well, it doesn't stand thinking of——”

When he had finished reading, Derek sat very still, staring at nothing.—The clang of the dinner gong startled him like the trump of doom.

Mrs. Macrae was right. The thing did not bear thinking of. Yet all that afternoon, while he was “undercutting,” he could think of nothing else. Lois lifting her face to Agar in the twilight; Lois standing in the doorway, with the summer night behind her and the light on her hair; Lois begging for her picnic because “this time was the only time”—

And now—she had been given six months, she was scared and miserable. And what had the devil Agar said to her—the cowardly brute? Had he been straight with her all along? The whole pitiful tragedy stirred him to the depths. In the past eighteen months he had confronted death in its rougher, uglier aspects; but this stealthy, implacable undermining of a young life took a painful hold on his imagination and his heart.

As he moved mechanically from one splendid tree to another, marking each one for death, he saw himself suddenly as a symbol of Fate, the ghostly Undercutter, who moves through the forest of human lives, setting his unseen mark—with how much or how little discrimination?—on one and another; here a woman, here a man, there a child. He shook

off the idea as morbid; but it haunted him.

And now the fatal finger had touched Lois Aymes—a pretty harmless butterfly made for love and laughter and the sweets of life. All he had ever criticized in her, all the trivialities that had jarred him were submerged in one overwhelming flood of pity. And none could help or save her. That, for him, was the essence of the tragedy.

He managed, not without difficulty, to write her a few cheering lines, reminding her that doctors often made mistakes; bidding her cling to hope (he, the least hopeful of mortals) looking forward to seeing her in camp.

Her brief reply gave him the measure of all she had suffered and was still suffering. For Lois was not given to brevity.

“You’re real kind,” she wrote, “like you always have been, and I’ll be real glad to see you. Do you remember—you said last time if I was in trouble, I’d know the true friend from the sham one. Well—I am and I do. But it’s not much use to any one anyway. My head feels all wuzzly. I can’t write about it. But—thank you. Gratefully, Lois Aymes.”

He read that poignant note twice over; and sharp tears pricked his eyeballs. It was a sensation he had not felt since he stood on the tramp steamer watching the grey blur, that was England, melt into the haze of sea and sky.

Ten days later she arrived with Dr. Rally, in Abe’s buckboard. Derek was off duty; for the camp

worked early and late in summer and had three hours "slack" in the heat of the day.

"You'd better be around and do the introducing," Mrs. Margett had said with her sidelong look. "Any old excuse will serve!"

So Derek was "around" when the rough cart—little more than a case on wheels—drove up the main track from the valley; and Lois was so patently glad to see him that he hoped Mrs. Margett's eyes were engaged elsewhere.

In a light summer coat and wide-brimmed hat, the girl looked prettier than ever; and it surprised him to find her so little changed. The hollows under her cheek bones seemed a shade deeper and her soft mouth had a pathetic droop. Otherwise there was nothing to suggest that ten days ago she had been at death's door. Only once or twice, when she fell silent, Derek caught a strange new look in her eyes. Mrs. Macrae was right. She was "scared." This evening he must talk to her and do what he could. Meantime, he was uncomfortably aware of Mrs. Margett's scrutiny and jarred by the Doctor's well-meaning chaff. Rally was a big lean Irishman, with a mop of brick-red hair and a laugh fit to lift the roof off: a slap-you-on-the-back sort of fellow, unhampered by the finer sensibilities. Unaware of 'Salie's misdemeanour, and anxious to cheer up his patient, he treated the whole matter as a joke.

"Sure, we're afther being no end of an invalid because we can't get rid of our little coff," said he with a wink at Lois and a huge guffaw. "But,

begorra, 'tis Windyridge that'll do the trick!"

Derek could almost see the girl quiver under these kindly onslaughts, and felt thankful when the doctor departed, in a final explosion of laughter, to enliven less sensitive patients in the camps higher up the valley.

By then, Derek's time was nearly up; and he was wondering how far he dare respond to Lois' appealing glance, when Mrs. Margett—bored with the whole situation—came to his aid.

"Better take Miss Aymes out and show her round. And you might come back later on to supper," she said.

So he took her out and they strolled to and fro in the shade of the pines. She moved listlessly, looking about her with dreamy unconcern: and Derek, badly at a loss, drew her attention to the grand array of peaks that dominated the valley.

She shook her head at their magnificence with a small rueful smile. "They're mighty fine. But I hate them. . . ." A pause. "Where's your little shanty you used to tell about? Is it near here?"

"Not very far. It's away in the forest the other side of the big clearing."

"I'd love to see it—and the waterfall with the deep pool. Couldn't you take me there this evening?—I don't like that woman."

Derek smiled. "Nor do I! The walk would be nice if it wouldn't over-tire you."

"Of course not." She looked away from him. "I feel much better now."

"I'm glad. And up there—you'll feel better still."

He saw her wince and cursed himself for a clumsy fool. "Don't *you* get telling lies, like the Doc.," she said very low; and her rebuke smote him silent. There seemed nothing more to say. They both felt so shy and tongue-tied that it was a relief when young Bill charged down upon them and took command of the situation.

"Tell Mrs. Margett not to wait supper," Derek said when it was time to go. "Soon as I'm free I'll get a snack and come along. Billy will see after you."

"Yes, I'll see after her," the boy echoed with masculine importance and a shy upward glance at the lovely vision, who was quite obviously Derek's princess.

"That's a good chap," Derek said gravely, and went off, leaving them together.

It was near sunset when he returned to find Mrs. Margett alone writing letters. No sign of Lois or Bill.

"Are they out?" Derek asked as she glanced up to greet him.

"Very much out! Your young lady—who looks wonderfully well, considering—sneaked off soon after supper and no one's set eyes on her since."

"Gone!" Derek's heart contracted; and Mrs. Margett saw the fear in his eyes.

"You innocent enough to be scared?" she asked

with a touch of amused contempt. "Not such a fool as she looks, that girl. She knows right enough if she stops out there you'll go and look for her. So you'd better make tracks and not disappoint her! Bill's been hunting round like mad."

Derek—too angry and anxious to retort—turned and left the shack without a word.

"Where the devil can she have gone?" he muttered half aloud. Then he shouted for the boy, who came running to him with a face of dismay.

"Oh, Derry—I couldn't help it—I *did* try!"

Tears were imminent and Derek laid a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "All right, old man. Perhaps she just wanted to look round and she's missed her way. I'll be sure and find her."

"Can't I come too?"

"No. I might be late. But I'll bring her back all safe. Don't you worry!"

The boy sighed and stood looking after him, with dog-like devotion, till he disappeared among the pines.



## CHAPTER V

“Heart too soft and will too weak  
To front the fate that crouches near;  
Dove beneath the eagle’s beak.”—EMERSON.

FOR all his brave words, Derek had not a guiding idea in his head as to why the girl had gone or where. Some childish romantic impulse probably to explore the forest; and she had lost the track. He was a fool to have told her about his shanty; but lacking even the ghost of a clue, that direction would be as good as another.

He paused in the open clearing, quiet and empty now; no scurrying figures; no shriek and whirr of machinery. Man, the eternal intruder, had vanished from the scene. There remained only the great silent forest people—the quick and the dead. Derek loved the place at this hour, when the peak in the West wore the afterglow like a halo of glory. But to-night he had no eyes for sunset splendours; no thoughts for anything but one pitiful human fragment wandering somewhere in that dim wilderness of pine-trunks and undergrowth and deceptive side-tracks. He would find her if he had to walk all night; and the fact that she could not have gone

very far would not necessarily make his task any easier.

Before he had gone many paces, he was checked by a shout behind him. It was Maggot's odd job boy, running after him with something white in his hand.

"*What's it?*" Derek asked impatiently. "I'm in a hurry."

"Wa-al," the boy said, grinning, "she arst me to be sure and give you this anyway—that gal from the Ranch. She's gone off in the forest. I tole her she'd better keep her wits alive an' stick to the track."

Derek's impatience vanished.

"Did you happen to see which way she went?"

Bob indicated the direction with a grimy finger.

"Long ago was it?"

The boy grinned again. "Less'n a lifetime! Mebbe half an hour—mebbe more."

"Thanks," Derek said curtly and hurried away.

The track indicated led towards the waterfall, and it was with a sharper prick of anxiety that he tore open the envelope, without slackening his pace. It contained a letter hurriedly and unsteadily scribbled in pencil; and Derek's frown deepened as he read.

"I feel I must write this to say good-bye to you and explain. Nobody else really cares a rap, so I don't trouble about the others. They're sending me up to Windyridge to drag out the misery and get me away from Jos. But I can't and I won't sit still in that dull hole just waiting and waiting—so I'm

going to get it over and done, if that pool you told about is deep enough. It will be easier that way. At least I *hope* so. It's all frightening and horrible, and nobody in the world has any use for me. So good-bye—Derek. It doesn't matter if I call you that now, and you're the only real friend I've ever had. I heard you came to Nealston. Why didn't you come to us? Were you unhappy? Did you guess about Jos? Well, I'll tell you true. He just fascinated me with his don't-care masterful ways. You seemed so sober and steady. Jos was fun and he was always there. I thought he meant marriage. Perhaps he did. I don't want to make him out worse than he is. . . But I know now that with men like him, if they can't have one woman, another will do. And he didn't lose much time letting me know I wouldn't do because of my wretched cough. And if no man will ever look at me again, there's no sense in life. Oh, I did *hate* him when he told me. But I suppose I was the fool to expect anything different. Men in life don't act like men in books. But I couldn't help thinking *you* would have been different, and I know now you are worth fifty of Jos, and it was only—I was fascinated. But it's too late. I'm done for all round. If I've hurt you any I'm frightfully sorry, and I do thank you from my heart for being so good and kind to your foolish unhappy

LOIS AYMES.

“I hope Bob will give you this. I gave him a quarter to make sure. Don't try to stop me. It's

simply cruel—and it won't be any use. Good-bye."

It had been impossible not to loiter a little while he wrestled with that illegible, unrestrained effusion, that struck at his heart like the cry of a wounded thing heard in the night. It appealed to the deepest most commanding impulse of his nature—the impulse to help; and now he went ahead down the sloping trail with long swift strides.

She said it would be cruel to stop her, to drag out the misery; and he was too honest to deny it. He held very strong views upon that complex problem; but by choosing to confide in him, she forced upon him the only possible line of action for a man so placed. He doubted her courage to take the plunge when it came to the point, in which case she might shrink from the idea of coming back, of confessing failure after that letter. She might lose her way and very certainly she would be chilled by the sudden drop of temperature at sunset in the mountains. Sheer pity mastered him. Her very follies, her softness and fecklessness gave her the appeal of a child; and children held a peculiar place in his heart. By some means he must save her. Beyond that point he had no leisure to look.

On he went in the deepening dusk, peering anxiously this way and that. At last, where the trees fell a little apart, the undergrowth showed signs of being recently trodden. Something light-footed had passed that way. His pulses gave a leap and swerving aside he followed those faint traces leaving very definite ones behind him.

In swerving he had turned eastward, and right before him through the pine stems glowed the new-risen moon—tawny-golden, immense, intimate as a living presence in that dim solitude. Derek caught his breath and stood still. He was nearing the little waterfall now; and there, in a patch of open space, the moon showed him what he sought.

On the rocky bank above the pool stood Lois, a mere strip of pallor against the dusky background.

Noiselessly he drew nearer and discovered that her face was hidden in her hands. It had not proved so easy after all: and Derek, in the reaction of relief, could afford to feel annoyed with her because she had come out, Lois-like, with neither hat nor coat to protect her from the evening air.

Softly he called her name. She threw up her head and swung round, dropping her hands with a gesture unconsciously dramatic.

“Oh! *why* did you come? I told you not!” And it was hard to say whether her cry had in it more of remonstrance, relief or fear.

“It was the only thing a man could do,” Derek answered in his most matter-of-fact tone. “Thank God, I’m in time.”

“There’s *no* God!” she flung out wildly, edging away as he drew near. “Or if there is, he cares no more than these terrible mountains what comes to a wretched girl like me. I’ve prayed and prayed I might be brave enough to jump—and finish everything quickly——”

Her voice broke. Sudden tears rained down her face.

"Have you been here long?" he asked gently. He felt powerless to cope with her in a mood so violent and uncontrolled.

"I don't know. It seems like ages," she answered, wringing her thin hands together and choking back her tears. "And it isn't because I'm afraid of God that I couldn't do it. But the water looks so cold and fierce. I—I didn't think out how it would be. I thought—I'd make one big rush and it would be over. But—when I got here everything looked so peaceful—so beautiful; and I—I was too frightened to make the rush, and now—it's all to do over again."

"It's *not* to do over again—ever." Derek forced himself to speak sternly. She so plainly needed steadying. "You must promise——"

"I won't promise—I won't," she cried, edging away again, nervous yet defiant. "How *can* you ask me to go on living with nothing to look forward to, simply coughing my life away. Nobody knows what it's like. Nobody cares. They send me up into the hills. I hate the hills. They're so big and cruel. My stepmother doesn't want me back and I hate her too. I can't stop on with Cousin Rose. It's just a nightmare. I've got to escape—some-how——"

Again her voice broke; and to Derek's dismay, she sank upon the ground, hid her face and broke into a storm of tears.

Never, in his limited experience, had he seen a woman so completely lose hold of herself; and the tradition of self-control in which he had been reared made the thing seem almost indecent. Had the circumstances been less tragic he would have gruffly begged her to "buck up" and pull herself together. But she was more than merely hurt. Her wound was mortal; and he shrank from laying a clumsy hand on it. Controlled grief would have moved him to deeper feeling. As it was, the ache of pity within him was tinged by a masculine feeling that he ought not to be present when the poor child was behaving like this. So he stood there considerately looking away from her to the moon that blossomed like a great night flower among the pine boughs. Then it occurred to his practical mind that she was catching cold: and having found something definite to say he turned to say it.

But at that moment she still further disconcerted him by dropping her hands and looking up, her face disfigured with weeping.

"I thought *you* would be different," she reproached him, with a pitiful catch in her voice, "but you're just as bad as the others. You don't understand—you don't care——"

"I-*do* care," he contradicted her, honestly, but with misleading emphasis; and, to his dismay, she caught his hand in hers, that was dry and feverish, and pressed it against her tear-wet face.

"Oh, if you care, why do you stand there and say nothing?" she murmured breathlessly, still

clutching his hand. "You're the only person who can stop me from wanting to finish it all off quick. You're so kind—so safe—I wouldn't feel so frightened. I'd promise you anything—and I'd keep my promise. But I was a fool, and if I hurt you I'm ever so sorry——"

And Derek stood there silent, feeling stupefied and helpless, like a creature caught in a trap; realizing, painfully, that by those three words spoken straight out of his heart he had cut the ground from under his feet. To tell her she had mistaken his meaning seemed as brutal as striking her. Yet—the alternative staggered him.

For the moment he could only compromise matters by taking both her hands and lifting her to her feet with the prosaic remark: "We ought to be going back, you know. It's treacherous in the mountains after sunset. If you stay out here much longer you'll catch your death of cold."

"So much the better," she retorted, with a smothered sob.

Derek did not feel called upon to argue that point. Without a word he took off his own rough coat and slipped it on to her. The action brought her almost into his arms. She swayed and would have collapsed against him; but he had just enough presence of mind to grasp her shoulders as if to steady her. And in that moment of contact he knew that to live out a lie was, for him, the last impossibility. By some means, as mercifully as possible, he must contrive to tell her the truth.



"You can walk back, can't you?" he asked gently. "You've knocked yourself to pieces. You're shivering."

She nodded, clenching her teeth to keep them still. "If you'll hold me . . . I might manage. . . ."

"All right. I'll hold you"—he slipped a hand through her arm. "My little shanty's not far off. Better go there first and rest a bit. There's a camp chair, cocoa and milk and things—I can make you a hot drink. Mrs. Margett will be anxious. But you're simply not fit—you're all to pieces." He spoke more rapidly than usual, spinning out commonplaces, as it were holding off the silence that would force out the truth; and all the while he was leading her back to the trail, holding her arm, just firmly enough to support her—no more.

Once or twice she glanced at him under her long lashes; then—"Derek—you *are* queer," she said with a small catch in her voice. "No one 'ud think, the way you behave, that you meant what you said—just now."

"I did mean it," he interposed, gratefully seizing the cue she had given him. "Only not quite—not quite—the way you took it."

He released her arm and confronted her. They had reached the trail now.

"Not—*that* way?" she echoed, her eyes wide and dazed. "But there's only one way that counts—with a man and a girl. Why did you pretend—it was cruel——"

"I didn't pretend. I spoke the truth—we've been

good friends, haven't we? And because we're friends, it hurts me—seeing you suffer. I'm ready and willing to help you; to do any mortal thing that I can——”

“Except the only thing that's a mite of use,” she murmured with shaking lips. “And it isn't as if . . . it would be . . . for long.”

The childlike simplicity of those broken phrases and her pathetic attempt at self-control moved him far more deeply than her tragical outburst of grief. Whatever else he could not do, one thing was certain: he could not leave her comfortless, doomed, uncared for. There was only one way, as she said, and thereupon he resolved to offer her the most he felt able to give.

“Miss Aymes——” he began.

“You might call me Lois.”

“Well—Lois,” he flung it out with a touch of defiance and his hands closed firmly on hers, that were not feverish now, but clammy and cold. “I had to tell you the truth.”

Her faint smile seemed to question that painful necessity.

“I said—I'd do anything; and you say you'd feel safe with me. So—will you give me 'at least the right to protect and care for you?”

“D'you mean—marriage?” she asked—half nervous, half eager.

“Of course. If I am to be any use, you must take my name. We must go through the form——”

“The *form!*” The blood rushed to her face and

she tried to release her hands ; but he held them fast. " I'm to be just a drag on you—and you'll be good to me out of pity and charity? Never! I have—got a mite of pride, if I did—talk wildly. I thought—you cared—or I wouldn't have—spoken. I know—you mean it kindly, but—I'd *drown* myself rather——"

This time she was too quick for him ; and wrenching herself free, she ran blindly, stumblingly back towards the river—

Derek—torn between pity and vexation—sprang after her. In a flash he realized that half-measures must go overboard ; and in that flash his decision was made. She needed saving from herself—and he must go all the way to save her. There was no time to see or think of anything else.

" Lois! Lois! Come back," he commanded. " You *must* listen—I haven't said all."

Some new note in his voice seemed to strike her. She stopped dead and swung round, facing him. " Sure thing—this time? You won't—let me down again?" she asked—and a half smile glimmered through her tears.

" I didn't let you down—and I never will," he answered gravely : and while the words fell upon his heart like stones, his detached brain noticed what a quaint figure of tragedy she looked in his big loose coat, the sleeves half covering her hands. " Come—be a good girl," he added, " it's worse than foolishness hanging about like this. We ought to be back in camp."

She came obediently now—her tragic aspect changed to a faint glow of happiness—and laid her two hands lightly on him.

“It’s not *only* just out of pity, is it?” she asked, looking anxiously into his eyes. “You are—a little fond of me?”

“I’m very fond of you,” he answered truthfully, ignoring the inconvenient half of her question. By way of proof he passed his hand lightly over her hair. She sighed and smiled in one breath. To a man more easily wrought upon she must have seemed sufficiently alluring for purposes of love making, if no more. But in Derek at that moment every sensation was subordinate to the nightmare sense of being snared in silken meshes that he had not the heart to tear asunder.

“And——” she hesitated. “We’ll really—be married—soon?”

“Presently,” he said—and his hand fell away from her hair. “You must give me time—to fix things; see about other work. And you must be good—Lois, and wait quietly at Windyridge till I’m ready for you. Wonderful air up there.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I’ve no use for Windyridge. But I’ll be ever so good. And when we’re married, I’ll slave for you, I’ll worship you——”

“Oh Lord, not that!” he said so abruptly that she gave him a quick look like a startled animal. “Now—come along to my little hole. Plans can wait.”

Again he slipped a hand through her arm and led

her along at a brisk rate ; and again she glanced at him once or twice in sheer bewilderment, that he should hold her arm when her waist was available. "Derek," she said for the second time, "you *are* queer. Haven't you ever made love to girls?"

"Never," he answered simply, looking straight before him. His brief madness in Jamestown scarcely came under that heading. "I'm not cut out that way ; so you must make allowances—and not get thinking there's anything wrong." It might prove a useful disability, he reflected, with an ironic flash of humour, like being a duffer at bridge.

By this time the rising moon had conjured the forest into a place of enchantment and eerie mystery. The trail, deeply shadowed in parts, was mottled with pearl-grey patches of light. Stars flashed through the pine branches like diamonds in dusky hair. The brooding silence above and around enfolded them like a ghostly presence.

Lois pressed closer. "Are there wild animals and things?"

"Nothing to be afraid of." And by way of reassuring her, he just perceptibly tightened his hold.

"Oh, you *are* a dear," she whispered, her head so near his that stray wisps of hair brushed his cheek. And quite suddenly it came over him that he could not face twenty minutes alone with her in his "badger-hole." Sheer funk—he admitted it. Straining at a gnat when he had swallowed the camel. But he badly needed time to realise the

whole incredible situation. And she was such an elastic creature. Already she seemed astonishingly revived.

In a patch of moonlight he paused and consulted his watch.

"I say, it's later than I thought. If you're feeling better—up to it, we really ought to forge ahead and get you your hot drink at the other end. They'll be wondering—it's hardly fair on them."

"I suppose it isn't," she agreed; and her evident reluctance made him feel a brute. Yet it stiffened his resolve. Possibly she hoped it might have the opposite effect.

"It's not so very far. I can manage all right," she added valiantly, after a small gap of silence. "I'd just love to see your shanty. But perhaps—some other time——?"

"Yes. Some other time," he assented cheerfully—and they went forward a little quicker than before.

Only when they were almost at the edge of things, where the forest merged into the clearing, he stood still and faced her, a whimsical half smile in his eyes.

"Look here, we must get you out of my coat and settle just what did happen!" he said. "I hate telling lies; and if I have to, I mostly bungle them. But Mrs. Margett's not precisely an understanding woman, and—it isn't a thing to talk about anyway. We'll have it that you got off the track—lost yourself, and I had a tough job to find you. That'll wash. I'll do the telling—and it's all she needs to know."

“Not about—us?” Lois ventured shyly. She had never known shyness with a man before; but more and more she perceived that this man was not as those others.

He shook his head. “Time enough—afterwards.”

She sighed and acquiesced. Though he had saved her so romantically, he seemed bent on depriving her of all her little triumphs and satisfactions—this very chivalrous and strangely backward lover.

“I’m—yours now,” she added with engaging meekness. “I’ll do anything you tell me, if you’ll only love me a little. It’s all I want in the world.”

“Foolish child! If I didn’t, we should hardly be here now,” he said more tenderly than he had spoken yet: and so plainly did her lifted face await the kiss she had every right to expect that no man in his senses could fail of understanding or response.

Very gently he took her shoulders between his hands, closed his eyes and touched her forehead with his lips.

Then a strange thing happened. That simple, unaccustomed act and the ivory smoothness of the girl’s skin swept him in a flash miles away from the moonlit forest, from Lois and her tragedy to the drawing-room at Avonleigh and the difficult moment of parting with his mother. So vivid was her transient presence that it was almost as if his lips touched the smoothness of her forehead; and there came to him a whiff of the faint scent she used, the very sound of her serene:

“ Good-bye, dear. Take care of yourself. Don't do anything rash.” Could she have guessed—could he . . . ?

In that bewildering instant he saw it all as through her eyes—the eyes of his own world. . . .

Then his brain righted itself with a jar and he found that Lois was sobbing on his shoulder.

The whole thing passed in the twinkling of an eye ; but the sharp revulsion of feeling painfully endured.



## CHAPTER VI

"Fate, higher than heaven, deeper than the grave,  
That saves and spares not, spares and does not save."

SWINBURNE.

AN hour later he was lying in his bunk between two logs that divided him from Mick and Joe Smithers. Joe slept musically, with his mouth open. It gave him a ludicrous air, as if he were trying to shout and could produce no sound. Mick lay on his back, in a wide strip of moonlight. His strong clean-cut face might have been graven in marble. A fine fellow: Canada at her best. All the cotton-covered windows were flung open. A restless breeze wandered through the pines like the sigh of a passing ghost. The long, barn-like room was barred with light and shadow, and softly sonorous with the breathing of thirty-four lumber jacks, who had royally earned their six hours of sleep.

The thirty-fifth lay very wide awake, realising, slowly and very completely, what he had done; or, rather, had been driven to do by force of circumstances and the appealing weakness of one unhappy girl. This, then, was the culmination of his great

adventure in search of knowledge! Fate, that had thwarted and harassed him from nursery days, must needs pursue him even to the ends of the earth; forcing him from his chosen path; thrusting him into one that he had no ambition to explore. He had kept away from the Ranch solely in order to avoid the very meshes that to-night had entangled him unawares. And he had not even the sustaining sense of doing a chivalrous or unselfish action. He simply did not see how any decent man, so distractingly placed, could have done otherwise; nor did it occur to him that the worldly-wise young man would never have wandered far enough from the sheep-track to risk stumbling into such a bog. Yet—released from the tension and the tragedy of it all—he could see the thing quite clearly from the sheep-track point of view: the view of Van and his mother who—thank Heaven—need never know of his passing madness. That was how they would regard it, at the mildest computation. And in truth he felt rather mad himself, now that the chill of reaction had set in and practical considerations came crowding into his brain. . . .

No question of Bombay in October. He might have known—! Later on, perhaps—goodness knew when! That was one of the many things he must not let himself think about—now. And he must give up the logging as soon as Maggots could replace him; find some occupation wherever the climate or surroundings gave her the best chance. Personally he would prefer Beulah Ranch if Jos could

be eliminated. Mrs. Macrae, with her sound good sense, would be a real stand by—and the children. He felt convinced Lois could never run a house. He also discovered with a shock that the idea of living alone with her terrified him.

That discovery pulled him up sharply. It reminded him of the moment, on the voyage out, when he had felt like jumping into the sea; and it had much the same effect. It restored his deadly clearness of vision and sense of proportion that saved him from inflating either pain or pleasure simply because his own ego was involved. It sharply reminded him, now, that his own dilemma would pass; while she, poor child, was in a far worse case—"coughing her life away." He recalled the unconscious vividness of her piteous phrase. Let him be thankful he had the means to brighten her few remaining months of life. That was the only sane way to look at it. Fate—and Lois—had thrust upon him this difficult and delicate job. He must pull it through to the best of his ability. No use lamenting that he "didn't know how." He would have to find out how. There spoke the spirit of the West, dinned into him by Mick and a year in the logging world. All he asked was that he might be allowed to pull it through alone. There could be no thought of going home; and none of them need know. Had it been a question of marrying for life, he would have no right. On that point he felt as strongly as any of them. But it was simply a terrible emergency. No way out of it that he could

see. Even his little local world need never suspect the truth. Mrs. Margett, who had received last night's explanation with polite scepticism, must be left to suppose that he had already let himself in; and he could easily give Maggots the impression of an existing engagement. They might think him a fool if they chose, so long as he managed to shield Lois.

He repeated her name half aloud: "Lois—Lois"—as if he were trying to whisper it into favour: then, quite suddenly, he fell sound asleep and never stirred till the strident tones of the cook-house gong called the whole camp to work again.

At the moment of waking, realisation smote him afresh. But the thing was done; and a strenuous morning's work left small leisure for brooding. Not till he had bolted his midday meal was he free to put in an appearance at the shack and bid Lois good-bye. They were on the eve of departure. The buckboard was waiting. Rally was engaged with Maggots in the office; Mrs. Maggots was exchanging laboured commonplaces with Lois in the living-room; and when Derek arrived she surprised him by pointedly leaving them alone.

For a moment he stood silent, feeling shy and dismayed; then Lois slipped a clinging hand into his. Her eyes were radiant. Her soft mouth quivered.

"Oh, Derek—is it really *true*?"

"It's true all right," he said, smiling. Then a

little awkwardly he put an arm round her shoulder and kissed her cheek. "Feeling a bit happier this morning, are you?"

"Tons happier." She nuzzled her head against his sleeve, like an affectionate animal. "I believe—Mrs. Margett knows."

"Quite likely. She's no fool."

A pause: and suddenly she glanced up at him. "When—?" she asked under her breath.

That simple question so startled him that, in self-defence, he pretended to misunderstand her. "I'll try and manage Sunday," he said cheerfully. "Then we can talk things over. So be a good girl—and don't get worrying." The voice of Dr. Rally resounded without. "There—time to be off. So its good-bye—Lois. Not for long!" His lips touched her hair.

She clung closer and kissed him shyly just below the ear.

"I simply hate going, but I'll try and be patient—now."

Five minutes later he stood with Mrs. Maggots at the door of the shack, watching the buckboard as it swung round a curve in the narrow road. Then she turned and looked at him—a deliberate look that brought the blood into his face.

"You going to be fool enough to marry that girl?"

"Yes—I'm going to marry her," he said coolly.

"I s'pose you understand she's some crock? Her lungs are pretty far gone."

He nodded, hating her. "No decent man would throw a girl over because of that."

She smiled her sleepy sceptical smile. "Has it bin on long?"

"I've known her close on six months; and I'm not one to blab about my affairs." ("Neatly done!" he congratulated himself.) "Now of course I must quit logging and fix things up as soon as possible."

"Quit—? When there's all this work on hand?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. But she's sick. She needs a comfortable home. I must see after her—do what I can."

Again that long, deliberate look; but it had a changed quality. "Well—I guess she's in luck! But what d'you suppose Maggots'll say to your quitting just now?"

"Remains to be seen. I rather think"—he frankly returned her look—"the boss is the kind that will understand."

"Mebbe you're right," she agreed indifferently. "He's soft!"

"He's *straight*," Derek flung out, in spite of himself—and left her.

He was not mistaken. Maggots—though regretful and mildly disapproving—did, in a manner, understand.

"The cards are all agin you, sonny," he said gravely, when Derek had made the best he could of a lame tale. "But if a man can't square the cards, he kin always play the straight game. It's a knock

losing you. But I'd sooner have you quit than go back on a woman."

Just because Derek's heart went out to the big simple fellow, whose wife systematically went back on him, he stood there tongue-tied: and Maggots, after chewing pensively for a few moments, went on: "She's a taking piece. Pretty as a bit o' china, an' nigh as brittle. But I reckon you don't b'long West. Logging isn't needs must with you—?"

"No. I can give her a good home; and she needs it now. . . . So it's only fair . . . the sooner the better. . . ."

"That's flat," Maggots agreed heartily. "I'll buzz round for a substitute an' you kin nip up an' see her Sundays." A pause. He cleared his throat, spat scientifically out of the window, and turned his candid eyes full on Derek. "Wa-al, here's luck to you, sonny. An' take my word there's no call to get too downhearted over her lungs. She's young; and consumptives, mostly speaking, have nine lives. You may enjoy a good few years together yet—for all the doctors say."

If Derek had been tongue-tied before he was petrified by that staggering attempt at consolation.

"Yes—it's possible—I hope so," he muttered confusedly; then pulled himself together with a jerk. "I hate putting you out. I meant to hang on till the contract was through. But I thought . . . you'd understand. . . ."

With that, he made his escape, leaving the mystified Maggots to fall back on his private conviction

that women—though the world would be a blank dull place without them—were, generally speaking, the devil ; a sentiment which poor Derek would have echoed, at that moment, from the depths of his heart.

“ A good few years——” All the afternoon, while he worked, those four words seemed to knock upon his brain like hammer strokes ; revealing to him, with terrible clearness, the character and dimensions of the risk he had taken, or been forced to take : he who was not altogether his own, to run risks with—in that line. That the doctor might be out by a few months was a contingency he had faced ; but years—! Years of estrangement and misunderstanding with those he loved ; years of Lois, clinging, eternally clinging, dragging him down. He now began to perceive the essence of his own tragedy :—the knowledge that for him all hope of happiness and freedom hung upon the death of one poor, pretty, feckless girl whom he had just promised to make his wife—

Kind-hearted Bill Maggots would have bitten his tongue out sooner than have proffered that ironic crumb of consolation had he guessed the truth.

On Sunday, in the keen freshness of very early morning, he and Kitts set out for Windyridge. It was a long ride, most of it uphill ; and it was a glorious ride. Now and again the track meandered through patches of forest ; shadowy regions where day was hardly yet born. But chiefly it climbed and curved along the open hillside, falling away to



the river-haunted valley with its savage guardian peaks that, at almost every turn, showed some change of aspect, some fresh play of light and shade.

Reluctant lover that he was, Derek would fain have ridden on and on till sundown. He and Kitts took their time over the journey, yet they came all too soon upon the huddled shacks and buildings of Windyridge Camp; a blotch of ugliness on the grandeur; an outcrop of sentient life in that region of rock and stone. At sight of it Derek awoke to the fact that he had formed no immediate plans and had yet to tell Lois who he really was.

He had no difficulty in finding the Wilkins' shack. There were but two women up at Windyridge and they baked and washed and sewed for half the men in camp.

Mrs. Wilkins proved to be a plump, pincushion of a woman, with a heart that oozed sentiment and kindness. She had made every arrangement for their comfort and privacy that her limited means allowed. Lois' cane lounge, a camp table and raw-hide chair were ostentatiously set out in an enclosed corner of her veranda, a primitive affair, smothered with climbing roses that thrust their way between the planks and conjured a mere lean-to into a veritable bower.

At the edge of the veranda Lois awaited him, looking so fresh and charming in her blue linen, with the sunlight entangled in her hair, that the desperate, fear-stricken girl of a week ago seemed almost the figment of a dream.

"Thar ain't no tonic like happiness. That's what I allus says," purred sentimental Mrs. Wilkins; and she retired precipitately that they might enjoy their fill of it undisturbed: an act of consideration for which Lois was grateful, if Derek was not.

But the half shy eagerness of her greeting caught at his heart. Without a word he put an arm round her and would have kissed her cheek; but she turned as if by chance and her lips lightly brushed his. Derek found their soft contact not unpleasant by any means; but the palpable manœuvre checked his impulse towards her. So long as she was child-like, the charm held: at a hint of the woman he shrank instinctively, like the sensitive plant brushed by a passing foot.

"That's over, anyway," he reflected, and proceeded to settle her in her chair. But he found himself mistaken. It was only just begun.

"You look a new creature," he said, smiling down at her. "This wonderful air——"

"It's not that. It's—what Mrs. Wilkins said. Don't stand there and look uncomfortable. Sit down and smoke."

She drew his chair so close to her own that when he rested an elbow on it she could lean her head against him. He felt a brute for objecting to the arrangement; suppressed a sigh and accepted the inevitable.

"Have I got to stay up here much longer, Derek?" she asked presently. "This week's seemed like an age."

He proceeded to explain matters as best he could, addressing his remarks to the crown of her head and the delicate tip of her nose and chin.

"If I quit the logging, I'd better come and work up here," he concluded sagely. "Dr. Rally says this is where you ought to be."

She shook her head and pressed it against his arm. "No—no. I couldn't stand the mountains long—even with you."

Check number one: and he hopefully played his next card. "Well—what about the Ranch? It's homely there——"

She drew in a sharp breath. "Oh, Derek—I couldn't. Because of Jos——"

"Were you—in love with him?"

"I think so. Not a bit—the way I feel for you. But he thrilled me. You can't help it—if a man makes love to you."

"D'you mean—did it ever amount to an engagement?"

"I—don't—know. He wasn't one to talk that way. We kind of took things for granted."

"That's rather dangerous."

"Yes—it is. But I'm safe now." She nestled closer and her fingers caressed the back of his hand.

"Derry—are you jealous?"

"No! I'm not much given that way."

She looked up at him with a faint droop of her lips.

"Isn't that all right?"

"I s'pose so. But I'd like you to be—a little!"

“ Sorry I can’t stage manage it for you ! ” he said, trying to leaven her sentiment with humour. “ It’s just the way I’m made. And I’m sorry the Ranch is no go. But I want to settle you where you’ll be happy and where it’s best—for your cough. Have *you* got any notion up your sleeve ? ”

“ Well, of course I’d like a nice little house in Nealston, where I could see the shops and the cars and the movies. Could you manage that, Derek ? ”

“ Yes—I could manage that,” he said slowly, and paused : for he saw the moment had come and he found that he hated telling her. He was mortally afraid she would make a fuss over it all. But he achieved it after a fashion ; the bare facts, sedulously unadorned.

Lois, however—her mind saturated with cheap fiction—could be trusted to do the adorning. She listened entranced—amazed. She even lifted her head from his shoulder that she might look at him and realize him in his new romantic rôle ; her prince in disguise ! And Derek, feeling anything but princely, righted himself in his chair with a very ungallant sense of relief. He foresaw the inevitable question : and the next moment, it was out.

“ But Derek—if you’ve got a fine house and money and a real live Viscount for a father, what’s the sense of fooling around out here with a herd of common men ? ”

He laughed and turned it off. “ I thought you were a democrat ! Plenty of ’em are quite as good as I am. And there are lots of well-born English-

men doing rough work out here. Very good for them."

"But they've mostly made a mess of things," she remarked sagely. "Have you—made a mess of things, Derry?"

"Not that I'm aware of," he said with a wry smile. Her harmless shaft struck home. "It's just a plan of mine and I intend to carry it through. No use badgering me. I'm dead obstinate!"

She sighed. "You are *some* puzzle, Derry! It seems so stupid— Can't you take me to England and show me your grand home?"

"No, I *can't*," he said bluntly.

"But you've got the money," she murmured; and he saw that the position would become untenable unless he made a stand once for all. "Look here, Lois—you must just take my word for things—or we'll never pull through. I'll do all I possibly can for you. But if you pester me with questions, you'll make me really angry——"

"Oh! please don't get mad. It's only—you're so mysterious."

"I'm not. We all have our reserves. And—as to Avonleigh—no one's living at home just now. My father's in India. I've got to stick out here for the present—and I've got to work. I've told you the facts because I like things straight and aboveboard. The main point is I've the means to give you a comfortable home and pretty things and little luxuries and all the care you'll need—doctors and medicines——"

He broke off there ; for her eyes, that hung upon his face, were changed. He saw the shadow of fear creep back into them. The joy of his coming, the romance of his revelation had banished it completely. For a brief, blessed half-hour she had forgotten. . . . Now the inexorable truth overwhelmed her.

“ Oh, Derek—so soon ! ” she murmured brokenly : and hiding her face against him burst into tears. She was the hurt frightened child again and all Derek’s awkward reluctances vanished outright. If her sentimentalism cloyed and repelled him, her real pain and tragedy moved him to the depths.

Enraged at his own stupidity, he put his arms round her and held her close.

“ Poor Lois—poor dear little girl ! I’m a clumsy brute.”

“ No—no,” she assured him with muffled vehemence:—and suddenly she was convulsed by a violent fit of coughing that seemed as if it would shake her frail body all to pieces. Derek could only hold her closer till the paroxysm passed, and she lay limply against him, her handkerchief to her lips.

Presently she removed it, glanced at it nervously and thrust it into her blouse. Poignant compassion pricked him and he kissed her hair.

“ D’you want anything ? ” he asked gently. “ Milk ? Brandy ? ”

“ N-no, thanks.” Her breath was still coming short and quick. “ Better now. It’s not half—so bad, with you—holding me.”

"I'm thankful for that," he said, and continued to hold her; while she, at intervals, opened her eyes and embarrassed him with a gaze of rapt adoration.

In less than half an hour she was herself again, eager over details and dates. Derek suggested July; just the civil ceremony, no fusses or furbelows.

"Not a wedding dress?" she asked ruefully. "I wouldn't feel married without it."

"Oh yes, you would! You shall have something just as pretty and more serviceable, and you can call it what you please!"

She surrendered her wedding garment with a good grace and pounced upon the honeymoon. Derek—who had left it clean out of his calculations—looked a little blank. He could not bear to hurt her feelings; but the prospect terrified him.

"Are you—death on a honeymoon?" he asked tentatively.

"Of course! It's the best part of the whole thing. At least"—she hesitated, blushing a little—"in novels it always is."

"You read too many novels, Lois, and the wrong sort," he said, swerving from the point. "They're about as much like life as a page of print seen in a mirror."

But she was not to be put off with evasions. The honeymoon was her ewe-lamb and she clung to it with meek persistence. "It's not only novels.

I've heard about it in life. So ideal, Derry—no one but each other."

"And at the end of a fortnight—any one but each other!" quoth the embryo cynic, shaking a wise head at her. "You both lose your tempers and get badly bored!"

"I haven't much temper to lose, and I could never get bored with *you*," she countered fervently, taking the wind out of his sails.

"Anyway, I've warned you!" he said, concealing his dismay. "So we'll risk it." He was on his guard now, speaking as if it were a life-long affair; and she was radiant.

"Oh—*Boy!* And where shall it be?"

Problem on problem! There seemed no end to it. But he was quick enough to see and seize the chance of modifying his ordeal. "As you are keen on towns," he suggested, "we might 'do the grand' at a good hotel. Vancouver—or Victoria. Plenty to amuse you. And I'd like to have a look at the Island. Or a steamer trip up the coast might be better for you. Sea air would pick you up."

Mercifully, she rose to the idea:—and at mid-day, when they joined the Wilkins family—two small boys and three stray bachelors—for dinner, she was full of it all; her cheeks flushed; the haunting shadow clean gone from her eyes.

"It's worth putting up with a good deal to achieve that much," Derek reflected in the course of his homeward ride. "And she's a lovable thing, if



only she had a shade more sense and a shade less sentiment!" The future did not look quite so desperate as it had looked a week ago. He knew very well there would be tragic and terrible things to pull through before the end came. But he had discovered his guiding principle: it was *her* tragedy. He was simply there to help her through. His own share of it was a transient and entirely secondary affair. And his own world need never know. For that crumb of comfort he was thankful exceedingly. Like a good hunter, he gauged his fences well ahead; and, on reaching them, was the better able to take them in his stride. He belonged, in fact, to the finer type of pessimist; the type that looks mischance full in the face, confidently expects it, and still goes forward—unhopeful yet undismayed.

Incidentally he had promised to buy Lois a ring next time he went to Nealston. She had chosen a ruby, and it should be a fine one. Whatever he was able to give her, he would give without measure or stint.

## CHAPTER VII

“There is one thing that is stronger than all our plans about life—and that is life itself.”—MAARTENS MAARTENS.

**B**UT Fate seemed unable to leave him alone. Whether his stoic refusal to be beaten was a negative form of inviting attack, let psychologists decide. The fact remains, that two days later she struck him another shrewd blow in the friendly guise of a letter from Jack.

At first sight it gave him a shock of pleasure. Then he discovered, with a start, that it bore the Nealston post-mark and the stamp of his own particular hotel. Pleasure evaporated. Just when his isolation was a blessing, an urgent need—! What the devil—? Hurriedly, he tore open the envelope and read:—

“DEAR OLD DIRKS,—

“Can you believe the evidence of your eyes? I can see you blinking mightily at the sight of my fist on your own special stationery! And *I'm* wondering mightily which of all the patches of forest I can see from my window enjoys the honour of your

company. But the point of this letter is to explain things more or less : so here goes. Remember what I wrote about Gay and ranching ? Well, it's in the air now. I've come out to have a look round, armed with an introduction to an English stockman in Calgary, wherever that may be ! Fact is, I've had rather a dust-up with my old dad. Schonberg, of course—our chronic and colossal bone of contention. Details *when* we meet. I got to loggerheads with him last time I was at home. Arguments and talking too straight about Germany and England. Old S. turned rather crusty over some remarks of mine. Dad sided with him. I lost my temper—and there was the devil to pay. Next day the old man rounded on me for being narrow-minded and impertinent. That was one too many for yours truly. Dad jawing about narrow views—when he can give me points in that line from here to Timbuctoo ! I could have shouted with laughter if I hadn't been in such a rage ; and I begged leave to point out that as he had spent vast sums on my education he might give me credit for knowing a thing or two. Schonberg himself may be all square ; but it's pretty common knowledge that the Germans are playing a low-down commercial game in this country, while our Radical lot are simply giving 'em everything they want and more also, with both hands !

“ Lord, how I'm running on ! Anyhow, it came to this—I said outright that if he was wedded to Schonberg the less we saw of each other the better. Then Gay's notion occurred to

me. Just a chance, if we stuck it out and did well, we might yet rescue Burltons from the clutch of the furriner! *Is* it a crazy castle in the air? I'm mad keen to get the benefit of your elephantine wisdom! I'm also keen to include you in the plan. Notion is I should spend a year or so on this ranch learning the ropes—then we can make our little plunge in land and cattle! Great sport! Can't you chuck and come ranching with me? Better still, have a hand in the plunge if you feel inclined? Put that in your pipe and smoke it! Gay and the aunt have come West. They're at Victoria now and I'm joining them. Felt I must get a sight of you first and talk all this over. Can the mountain come to Mohammed—or may Mohammed have the honour—? I'd rather like to see you in your war paint. Anyhow, *let* me see you first possible moment.

“Yours till Hell freezes,  
“JACK.”

Derek ran his eye over that amazing letter and could have cursed aloud. Then he read it through again, slowly, with a feeling of stunned despair. A fortnight, even ten days earlier, and it might have saved him. Now it was a mockery; a mere feast of Tantalus; and, in addition to refusing, he must contrive to act the part of newly-accepted lover with Jack, of all people on earth—

After dinner, he retired to his badger-hole and wrote a brief reply.

“DEAR JACKO,—

“Your bombshell has duly exploded and I’m still collecting the fragments of my scattered senses. It will be great to see you again. But I can’t get away this week, so you must come along here. My friend the manager will put you in the way of getting to the siding where you change for Number One Camp! I can meet you there with a mount—of sorts. And I can offer you a bunk for the night if you don’t mind roughing it with a mixed lot, mostly good fellows. As to your castle in the air—I’m not so sure if it’s an improvement on the Indian Army. But with Burlton blood in your veins I don’t wonder you’re keen to have a try. We may be doing Schonberg an injustice. There are Germans and Germans. But I’m all for keeping British commerce in British hands.

“For myself—I’m not free now to come and see you through your tenderfoot trials. Since last I wrote, the unexpected has happened and I’ve got myself engaged to be married. You can’t be more surprised than I am. I met her at the Ranch I told you of. Her name is Lois Aymes. She is pretty and very delicate. In fact there’s just been a rather bad illness and the doctor says her lungs are affected—seriously. So it’s a sad sort of business for both of us: just the kind of thing that *would* happen to me. And—see here, Jacko. I’m not telling them at home. She’s a dear, good girl, but not exactly their sort. And as there’s this trouble, she’s better out here. So here I propose to remain for the present. But I must

quit roughing it and make a home for her. Just accept the facts and don't plague me with questions, there's a good chap. I'm keen to hear all your plans and news. So there'll be plenty to jaw about. Come Thursday if you can.

“ Yours ever,  
“ DEREK.”

“ Sport the roughest togs you possess, or it will be a case of ‘ Who's your dandy friend ? ’ ”

Jack came on Thursday, in his roughest togs, and Derek met him at the siding with Kitts and a brother cayuse contributed by Maggots, who had given him half a day off. Jack was in great spirits, admiring everything, and there was “ plenty to jaw about,” apart from Derek's disturbing and rather mysterious communication ; and yet——

Every now and then their talk would hang fire, in an odd, unnatural way : not the comfortable silences of friendship, but discomfortable blanks. They were “ one and one with a shadowy third ” ; and that shadowy third robbed their intercourse of its old free and easy flavour. Though Derek had always been “ a secretive villain ” at best, one could frankly chaff him about it. There had never been between them the awkward under-sense of having to tread cautiously here or sheer off altogether there : a sense that nine times out of ten can be accounted for in three words—enter the woman. Also, Derek seemed to have grown years older and miles farther away.

“Confound the women!” thought Jack, who, personally, appreciated them as the luckless Derek had never done. And he straightway concluded, with youthful sapience, that the pretty delicate thing was “no chicken” and had doubtless inveigled old Dirks—who was as innocent as a babe for all his sagacity; and naturally the good fellow wasn’t going to give her away. If only he had come out a month or two earlier! It was beastly rotten luck all round—

In the intervals between these distracting reflections they talked and laughed naturally enough. Derek—in defiance of reserves—keenly appreciated the mere change of associating with a fellow being of his own sort, one who shared his personal interests and ideas. Though incommunicative about himself, he had plenty to say about the ways of forest creatures and the super-equine intelligence of Kitts the second: while Jack enlarged on the wonders of his recent journey through the Rockies, and reasserted, between whiles, with increasing conviction, that Canada was “great.” Then they dabbled fitfully in home politics and the threat of civil war. Altogether there was much virtue in the long leisurely ride and the mere satisfaction of being together again; though it was not the unmixed delight it would have been under happier auspices.

Later on, when they were established in Derek’s badger hole, matters improved considerably. No shadowy third impaired the enjoyment of their picnic supper—canned stuffs, fruit and cheese—

washed down with Derek's famous brew of cocoa and milk.

"Jove! It tastes like Trinity and your princely rooms there!" Jack sighed, adding hot water to the dregs, as his habit was in those unshadowed days.

Derek nodded feelingly. "Good old Trin. Coll.! Wonder what lucky beggar is luxuriating in my rooms now? Light up, Jacko, and we'll go into committee on this comprehensive plan of yours. There's something to be said for it; but I have my doubts whether you'd cotton to the life."

Jack admitted that the Indian Army would be more congenial; but the bare chance of rescuing Burltons from the Schonberg yoke, off his own bat, had fired his youthful optimism.

"The old dad laughed at me first go off," he confessed, looking up at a star that glimmered through the outspread wing of Derek's cedar—"But when he saw I was in earnest he admitted that something might come of it in time, if Gay put in part of her money and all her sound French brain, not to mention her sisterly genius for keeping me on the rails. It's the first year I rather boggle at. And I was counting on you, you old sinner."

"Then you should have come sooner. But here I am anyhow," he added with resolute cheerfulness, "and I can put you up to a tip or two."

He proceeded, without further invitation, to recount certain incidents of his own early days that had not found their way on to paper; and Jack, as



he listened, began to understand why this new Derek gave him an impression of having taken liberties with the calendar.

Too soon their time was up and they must think about getting back to camp.

"To-morrow morning," said Derek, as he fastened his locker, "you shall see for yourself the up-to-date process by which a hundred-foot Douglas fir is converted into fodder for the saw-mills. I've marked down a dozen splendid fellows to-day. I'm fool enough to jib at it sometimes."

"Yes—it does seem rather a shame.—And when are we to meet again, Dirks, and have another pow-wow?"

Derek looked doubtful: then yielded to temptation. "I might manage Nealston on Sunday, if you care about hanging on."

"Rather. I'll wire to Gay."

Derek did not answer. He was looking thoughtfully into the heart of darkness barred with ink-black pine-stems. "I've been thinking," he said slowly, "about Calgary. I believe it's a decent sort of place. I might find out if there's accommodation—and other things suitable for—for Lois."

It was his first direct mention of her. It brought back at once the lurking shadow of restraint that withheld Jack from hoorooshing, as he would naturally have done, over Derek's happy idea.

"Ripping notion," he said. Then, after a brief hesitation, he took courage. "See here, old chap, you said I wasn't to plague you with questions, and

you must admit I've been the very pink of obedience. But I suppose a pal that sticketh closer than a brother may be permitted to ask—When is it going to be ? ”

Derek's smile lacked the sudden radiant quality Jack remembered so well. “ About the middle of the month,” he said.

“ Mayn't I offer my services as best man ? ”

“ Lord, no. There'll be nothing of that sort. The registrar at Nealston will do the job. I hate a fuss, and—she has hardly a belonging in the world.”

“ Ah, that explains ! ” thought Jack, still hugging the inveiglement idea. “ And then—what next ? ” he ventured aloud.

“ We thought of a steamer trip up the coast amongst the islands. After that—I hardly know yet.”

All in a moment Jack saw his chance and seized it boldly.

“ Well—I do. You come and stay with us at Victoria—a week at least. I want you to meet Gay, and I'm naturally keen to meet—your wife.”

Derek started at the unfamiliar word. “ I'm sorry, Jacko, and I don't want to seem a beast ; but—I'd very much rather not. And it saves futile argument if I say so straight.”

Jack's face fell. He was more than hurt. He was almost angry. “ I'm damned,” he said with conviction. “ If you're going to take *that* line, you may just as well chuck me outright and be done with it.”

To his surprise Derek quietly took hold of his arm. "Jacko—don't make a blame fool of yourself," he said in a gentler voice that recalled old days. "If it was only you—it might be all very well. But I hardly know your sister, and I've never seen her aunt. Nor have you. And you must admit it's a bit thick to go giving invitations, in their name, to a pair of stray folk who would probably bore them to death."

Jack laughed. "You won't wriggle out of it that way. If they endorse my invite—will you accept?"

And as Derek did not answer at once he went on impatiently: "What's the blooming mystery, Dirks? You're not committing a crime. Of course this cruel bad business of her health makes it—not like an ordinary affair. But you can trust Gay to any lengths for sympathy and understanding. She's not the fair-weather kind. It's when there's trouble she comes out at her best. So do give us a chance, old man, if they back me up."

He was irresistible; and Derek had no genuine desire to resist. What matter, after all, once the ice was broken?

"All right," he said, "we'll leave it at that, if all parties are agreeable."

And at sight of the relief in Jack's face, he tightened his hold. "Good old Jacko! Did he have his aquiline nose bitten off by a beast who had lost his manners in the wilds?"

But Jack was very much in earnest. "I don't

care a damn about manners. But I *do* care about you. I feel as if—I'd mislaid a bit of you, and I don't half like the sensation."

"You incurable old sentimentalist!"

"Rot! I suppose a man's allowed to care for his friends?"

"Happy thought! We're in the same boat, as far as that goes. So—if you can work a *bona fide* invite, we'll come along to Victoria after our trip."

And on that understanding they parted next day: Jack still anxious and mystified; Derek considerably cheered at the prospect of curtailing honeymoon conditions and spending a part of that dreaded month in Jack's society.

## CHAPTER VIII

“ In her heart hovered the thought of things  
Past, that with lighter or with heavier wings,  
Beat round about her memory, till it burned  
With grief that brightened and with hope that yearned.”  
SWINBURNE.

**I**T was a clear afternoon of late July, the sky incredibly blue, the air warm and very still. The land-locked strip of ocean, between the west coast and the Island, jewelled with a host of lesser islands, lay drowsing in the sunlight, its milky surface rising and falling rhythmically as the breath of sleep. Only passing steamers and small craft set up a commotion of surface ripples that here and there aspired to be wavelets and fell again too lazy to break in foam. And away across the Straits of Juan de Fuca, the Olympian mountains sprang sheer out of the Pacific ; their rugged masses of rock and promontory lowering darkly between the opalescent sea and the galaxy of peaks that dreamed and gleamed far up in the burning blue.

Summer at its zenith seemed poised spellbound, a brooding spirit of peace, above the frets and agitations of earth ; but Derek Blunt, leaning on the

taffrail of the Victoria boat, felt in his veins and in his spirit more of the languor than the enchantment of the year's high noon. The sensation was so foreign to his nature, the root cause so self-evident, that he was doing his valiant best not to be aware of either. He told himself he was tired of idling ; but he knew very well that he owned a healthy appetite for idling in the right company. If that wonderful trip up the coast had been made with Mark or Jack——!

But it was Lois—now, unbelievably his wife—who leaned on the rail beside him, her arm pressed against his. He could feel all through him that she was aggrieved at his prolonged silence ; waiting for him to speak. And the curse of it was that he had nothing to say. Probably she was in the same predicament ; but it was one of her obsessions that, if he fell silent for more than five minutes, he was bored. Whereas, if the truth could be told, the fatal thing assailed him most acutely when he was belabouring his brain to make small talk for her benefit. But the truth—so far as he was concerned—could never be told ; and he had not realized in advance how subtly that simple fact would vitiate their whole relation.

Already they seemed to have exhausted their few topics of mutual interest ; and Derek, as he watched the misty uplands of Vancouver Island grow clearer every moment, was blessing Jack for the invitation he had so ungraciously refused—

“ Say, Derry—look there ! What is it ? A fountain in the sea ? ”

Lois' voice startled him out of his reverie; and he saw what seemed a jet of silver spray that caught the sunlight, shimmered into a mist of powdered jewels and vanished like a breath on glass.

"Never seen a whale blowing off steam?" he asked, smiling at her wide-eyed wonder. He could love her—almost—in her childish moods. "I saw no end on the way from Australia."

"My, how queer! What d' they do it for?" she asked, and he proceeded to explain the phenomenon. It enabled him, unobtrusively, to shift his position, a small manœuvre at which he was becoming an adept; and it led him to notice a torn petticoat frill that drooped forlornly below her short skirt.

"Lois—there's your frill torn again," he said reproachfully. "I thought you'd mended it."

"I did."

"With a needle?" he challenged her, smiling.

"No: with pins."

"Thought so. That's your one notion of mending. Run and stitch it on properly—there's a good girl. Looks so degraded . . . and I want you to make a good impression."

"Oh, Derek—how unkind you are!" Tears sprang to her eyes. "And I put on my prettiest things on purpose."

"So I see. Very becoming!" He surveyed her with amused tenderness. In her wide straw hat and silky summer frock she looked pretty enough, almost, to justify the idea that he had stumbled into an imprudent marriage because his heart had run

away with him. That was the best that could be made of it—to outsiders. "You look ripping," he added, quite sincerely, "but you don't seem to see how those little untidinesses spoil the whole show. Look sharp! We're nearly there; and for heaven's sake be ready in time."

"I'll try, Derry," she promised, soothed by his compliment, and hurried away. Once she looked back to see if he were watching her; but he was leaning on the rail again. Happily she could not guess the nature of his thoughts.

There had been a slight strain between them the last few days; honeymoon politeness wearing a little thin; and the blessed relief it was to be without her, even for ten minutes, made him feel apprehensive for the future. But then—thank goodness! there would be work to do; unfailing avenue of escape from every ill. He would pull it through, somehow: he must, for her sake and his own self-respect. In very truth he grudged her nothing he was able to give. He deferred to most of her whims, was tenderly concerned for her health, and very patient, on the whole, with certain petty yet annoying defects that closer intimacy revealed. In Vancouver City he had bidden her buy any feminine finery she wanted, and had wandered with her from shop to shop, marvelling at the cost of such flimsy affairs as transparent blouses, ruffles and scarves that would be little or no use to her up at Nealston. He honestly wanted her to be happy—to forget the haunting fear. He was prepared to do anything, in



reason, that would keep her happy—except make passionate love to her, morning, noon and night : and by now he had discovered that this state of things was her one idea of bliss. Yet she lacked altogether the coquette's power to provoke and charm, that might have made matters easier. She was simply drenched with sentiment and genuinely in love. Unhappily for her, the very clinging nature of her devotion—and what he called her penny novelette point of view—had the fatal effect of making Derek shrink farther into himself.

It was all quite in keeping with the sub-acid irony of life as he had known it from childhood. Then, the natural love he craved had been denied him. Now when he had put his heart into other things, a love he did not crave was given him in cloying measure—the wrong kind from the wrong person. But that was no fault of hers, poor child. The difficult demands she made on him were natural enough ; and he, without lover's love at command, had done his halting best. To him the whole affair still seemed dreamlike and unreal. Ever since the fatal day when they had been transformed, by a few sentences and signatures, into man and wife, he had put behind him all futile hankering after the old life. He was simply Lois' husband—while she needed him ; self-dedicated to protect and cherish her and, if might be, to prolong her short lease of life. Since then he had not written a single letter. The dream-feeling of detachment made things a trifle easier. He half dreaded the intrusion of Jack

and his sister who would dispel it ; even while he craved the intelligent companionship of his real own kind, who would not incessantly make calls on him that he could not fulfil.

The details on the low foreshore grew clearer every moment : Victoria's noble Parliament buildings on one side, the upward sweep of the town on the other, the winding river-like harbour thronged with craft, great and small. That child was taking her time over things. She would be late to a dead certainty. She was invariably late for everything—

And Lois, seated on her cabin trunk, was pricking her fingers over the detestable frill—which she had twice mended with pins—and grieving that the most wonderful experience of her life was over. It had exceeded all her visions, if not her desires. Derek had been an angel to her ; and yet—vaguely, without analysing things, she felt troubled. His original confession that he did not care “ that way ” had been overlaid by the thrill of after events.

Responsive and emotional herself, she had taken it for granted that the right sort of feeling must come in time. Now she began, dimly, to fear it never would. He was odd and difficult ; and—yes—in some ways, a little disappointing. But for all that, she adored and admired him more than ever. The glamour of Jos Agar was almost as if it had never been. Yet Jos had given her what she craved—the passionate, masterful love making that one read about in books ; and she could not altogether shut out the memory

of those thrilling, disturbing weeks when the spring had "gone to her head"; when his fierce caresses had demolished her frail instinctive scruples, and her terrifying illness had revealed, in a flash, the loveliness of life, the awful mystery of death and the nature of Jos Agar's love—

Ought she to tell Derek—everything?

During their engagement that question had troubled her at intervals. And it troubled her still. She was not by nature deceitful, and she hated to have a big secret from him. But first she had feared he would not marry her; and now she feared his anger, the loss of his tender protecting kindness. The sense of having done wrong troubled her hardly at all. She had meant no harm; but she was quite aware that right-minded girls did not go all lengths before marriage. Now she was miraculously married to a man who was a "really truly gentleman."

The grand ladies of his world would never so demean themselves, and she shrank from shaming him by a confession of such improper behaviour. Sometimes she wondered if she were making too much of everything. Men were queer—she did not understand them. But without them there was no sense in life. And her thoughts trailed off into speculations about this "Jack" that Derek seemed so fond of—

All these mental distractions so hindered the progress of her needle that, when the pulsing of the engine throbbed slower and slower, of course she was not ready—and Derek was seriously annoyed. He did not say very much, but it was the things he

refrained from saying that were apt to hurt her most. On this occasion his annoyance was short lived.

It vanished at sight of Jack, resplendent in tennis flannels, awaiting them on the quay. Beside him stood the girl of the Southampton express with the sun in her eyes and the same clear swiftness about her whole aspect, like a bird poised, ready for flight. Derek was surprised to find how distinctly the impression of her had remained in his memory. He did not know that others had made the same discovery. There are certain natures that cannot hide their light under a bushel. Gabrielle de Vigne was neither very lively nor very talkative, her gaiety was of the spirit, deep down; and her light, sure touch, even on trivial things, was simply a part of the French genius for life.

Before the drive out to Silversands was half over, Lois had lost her shyness; and Derek—who had been distinctly apprehensive about “those women”—felt blessedly at ease. The stretch of open country, with its English aspect, was pure refreshment after the forest-burdened mainland. Here, on the southern tip of the Island, were lightly wooded slopes, fields and hedgerows; and at sight of a lordly oak, sunset-tinted with its second leafage, Derek exclaimed aloud.

“You never told me, Jacko, I was going to get a sight of England.”

“Thought it would be a pleasant little surprise! Wait till you get to Silversands and you shall sniff England—real sweet peas and mignonette!”

“ Oh, good ! And on the quay I *heard* England  
—— ! ”

Miss De Vigne's smile suddenly reminded him of the moment when he had edged nervously away from the sleepy young woman in the train. Was it the same Derek who sat opposite her to-day ?

“ It does sound friendly, doesn't it ? ” she was saying. “ The legend on the mainland is that the Victoria voice is even more English than the real thing ; and the right-minded Victorian takes it for a compliment ! Coming straight from the East it's curious to notice how the voices soften as one nears the Pacific. This end of the Island has a lovely atmosphere of Home ; and Silversands belongs to a retired naval officer, who evidently set himself to plant a real bit of it out here in the West.”

Derek's heart warmed towards that unknown naval officer as they rolled up the drive, and his nostrils breathed in the first faint whiff of lilies and sweet peas and mignonette, and the lemon-scented fragrance from Cloth of Gold roses that smothered the veranda.

“ My ! Isn't it just lovely ! ” murmured Lois— and the illusion of home was gone—

Madame de Fontenac greeted them kindly, if a little formally. She was a slender woman with iron-grey hair, features a trifle austere in repose and a charming smile. Her very correct English was a little stilted and she talked French to her niece.

Lois, in a bedroom with leaded casement windows

and Chippendale furniture, fancied herself in fairyland.

"Is your home anyway like this, Derry?" she asked, opening mysterious little drawers and fingering the polished wood.

Derek was standing near the window, sniffing luxuriously. "Well—no," he said, smiling. "About three houses this size could go comfortably into Avonleigh. It's a great old place—mostly built of stone. But—it smells like this, in summer——"

She caught the wistful note in his voice. "Don't you feel just mad to get back there sometimes?" she asked superfluously.

He nodded and sought refuge in his dressing-room from further inflictions. She had a genius for unwittingly touching him on the raw.

Dinner in the rose-covered veranda enhanced the fairyland sensation; and here were no mosquitoes, no black-fly that, on the mainland, makes high summer a very doubtful joy. And the dinner was worthy of its setting—sweet-peas in the vases, the gleam of polished glass and silver, perfect cooking, soft voices and intelligent talk. It was a long time since Derek had so enjoyed a meal.

When the men were left alone with their coffee and cigarettes, they sat silent for a spell in sheer content with the whole thing and the pleasure of being together. Presently Jack said:

"Dirks—she's a sweet creature. But—so young!"

Derek smiled. "Did you expect a Methuselah?"

And Jack, half ashamed of the inveiglement obses-

sion, could only murmur : " No. But—such a kid ! It's cruel hard lines."

Derek was silent. He did not want to talk about Lois. The spell of home associations was on him. He wanted, for a brief hour, to forget. And Jack, watching him while he smoked, wondered what was at the bottom of it all.

Suddenly Derek raised his head and sniffed deliberately. " Low tide ! " he said. " Seaweed ! I can smell it through all this. Lord—it's good. Are we reasonably near the shore ? "

" Quite. There's a path at the end of the garden leads straight to the beach."

With a great sigh Derek rose to his feet. " Come along then," he said. " I feel like walking all night."

" Righto ! I'm agreeable."

At that moment Gabrielle re-appeared. " The spectacle-case of *ma tante*, please, Jacko ! " she said ; then, looking from one to the other, " Are you coming in, you two ? "

" No, we're off to the shore. Don't get rattled if we're latish."

Her smile had an indulgent mother-tenderness. " I'll be up," she said, and left them.

Strolling through the garden, they breathed the indescribable fresh moisture of England's summer. But once they were through the lane with the scrunch of pebbles underfoot, the dream evaporated. For there, over the water, loomed the great mainland ranges—Canada's coastal mountains and the Rockies—resplendent in the after-glow. Farther south, the

Olympian snow-line, and Mount Baker, ghostly, aggressive ; a landmark to ocean steamers—for miles and miles.

Hills and the sea—can earth boast a more splendid conjunction than these, the symbols of eternal steadfastness and eternal unrest? Derek—though inured to the sublimities—caught his breath and stood silent, absorbing it all. Then he turned to Jack with a smile of grave content.

“ This is great,” he said quietly. “ Come on ! ”

Thus majestically companioned, with no sound but the lazy lapping of wavelets against seaweed-covered rocks, they walked on and on ; and for that one while Derek did manage—almost—to forget. . .

It was near eleven when they returned ; and Gabrielle, who was busy writing, had a tray ready for them ; yet another reminder of Home.

“ Mrs. Blunt seemed rather tired,” she said, “ so I persuaded her not to wait up for you.”

“ And who the dickens is Mrs. Blunt ? ” asked Jack, screwing up his nose. “ I practically regard her as a sister-in-law. Can't we call her Lois, old man ? ”

“ Certainly,” said Derek ; “ she'll appreciate it.”

“ Good ! I vote for Christian names all round. Anything else would be sheer rot.”

Derek went up to bed feeling happier than he had done for months. Jack was going to be a trump about it—he might have known. And the girl too.



Lucky devil to have a sister like that. A blessing that Lois had turned in early and would be sound asleep—

But Lois was not asleep. She had merely exchanged her dress for a kimono and was lying back in her chintz-covered chair with a novel on her lap and undried tears on her cheeks.

“ Oh, Derry—I thought you were *never* coming ! ” she greeted him with an aggrieved droop of her lips that he was beginning to know too well.

“ And *I* thought you had gone to bed like a sensible girl. Miss de Vigne said you were tired.”

“ Yes—but I was mostly bored. It was real mean of you going off like that—the first evening. I hadn’t any use for two strange women. It was you I wanted—and your friend.”

Derek frowned. “ I’m sorry,” he said without much penitence in his tone. “ But if I can’t leave you with them sometimes, how the dickens am I to see anything of Jack ? And what else d’you suppose I’m here for ? ”

“ I thought we were here for—our honeymoon. But if you only want to get rid of me——”

“ Oh, Lois, *don’t* be so unreasonable ! ” he broke in desperately. Tears were imminent and he dreaded them only a shade less than her fits of coughing. “ I ought to have thought. Careless of me. But you know, dear, Jack and I are like brothers. So you must make allowances. You’re dead tired. Hurry up and get to bed.”

It was useless. The sobs she had been trying to

restrain came in a sudden storm: choking her, shaking her—

And while he halted a moment between vexation and pity, sobs gave place to a paroxysm of coughing. At once he was on his knees; clasping her in his arms; recalling her pathetic remark at Windyridge—"It's not half so bad with you holding me."

It was the most startling attack he had seen yet. There was blood on her handkerchief; and her terror at sight of it steadied him—

"Am I—dying, Derry?" she asked in a small voice when the worst was over.

"Nowhere near it, little girl," he assured her—stroking her hair that was dank with sweat; and she nestled against him with a sigh of content. "There's milk," she murmured. "Miss de Vigne put some.—She's real kind."

He gave her the milk. Then, very tenderly, if not very skilfully, he helped her into bed and bathed her forehead with eau-de-Cologne. Still she clung to him. "Stay by me, darling—I'm frightened. I just want—to feel you there." And after a pause: "Will you—kiss my eyes to sleep?"

It was her childish, sentimental fancy that his kiss on her eyelids would charm away night terrors; and because it was childish, it appealed to him. So he kissed them in turn and stayed by her till the clinging fingers fell away from his.

Then, for a while, he stood looking down at her, strange and sad emotions distracting his heart. She was such a pretty creature; so affectionate and

fragile and pathetic : why did she so completely fail to stir his pulses and win the thing she craved ? The problem was beyond him. He gave it up as hopeless ; undressed and slipped into his own bed devoutly hoping she would be better in the morning.

She was not better in the morning. She awoke flushed and feverish, obviously unfit to get up. He had all a man's dislike of making a fuss in a strange house ; but there was nothing for it, and he bade her stay in bed. He would explain.

He went down dreading it ; but Jack's amazing sister received his information without turning a hair. Derek was not to be anxious. " The poor child " was probably a little overdone : she would send for Dr. Clifton. And she insisted on carrying up the tray herself ; while Madame de Fontenac—charmed to find that Derek could talk French—made gracious, tactful inquiries that completely set him at ease.

For all that, he felt convinced that they must clear out ; and he said as much to Jack the first moment they were alone. Knowing his Jack, he was prepared for a tussle ; for anything, in fact, except what actually occurred.

The tussle took place in the veranda. Jack would not hear of it. Derek would hear of nothing else.

" We're obviously unsuitable as guests," he insisted, after Jack had wasted several rounds of ammunition on him. " At any moment—things may

take a serious turn. I'll go and squint round the hotels. The doctor may know of—a Home——”

At that moment Gabrielle herself appeared and Jack flung a detaining arm round her shoulder.

“Gay, you old darling, come and stand up for me. Dirks is the most obstinate beast in creation. He's talking rot about rushing off to an hotel. Thinks they're in the way. I tell him that's an insult and he's a blithering idiot. Kindly confirm my statements.”

And she proceeded to confirm them, with such patent sincerity, that Derek could no longer hold his ground.

“As to being in the way—if you want the real truth, it's you two men who would be better elsewhere—just for a few days. In fact, I was coming to suggest it,” she added, in response to Derek's incredulous gaze. “There's nothing to be anxious about, Dr. Clifton says. The—the whole thing has been a little too much for her strength. A few days' rest and—*ça ira*. If you'll trust her to me——”

Derek, fearful of betraying his relief, was thankful for Jack's shout of triumph.

“There now! What did I say, you old sceptic? Your Lois knew exactly how to win Gay's heart. She never loves any one properly till they're ill.”

“Jacko, you're superfluous!” The girl laughingly waved him aside. Then she turned to Derek. “Well—have I done for myself altogether?”

“Rather not—if it's really better for her—if she agrees——”

"I've told her it's a sound prescription—that I shall be delighted——"

"You've told her!" he echoed, surprised out of his caution; and the smile deepened in her eyes.

"Yes. I thought as a medical suggestion, it might be more acceptable. She was very sweet about it—very brave——"

"Thank you—thank you—I'll go up to her," Derek muttered, quite overcome, and plunged into the house.

Jack looked thoughtfully at the empty doorway. "Poor old Dirks!" he said. "I can't make him out these days. Something wrong—somewhere."

"The chief wrong," said his sister quietly, "is that—she's utterly unfit.—He ought not to have married her."

"Oh, I say—hard lines! A very stern Gay!"

"Over some things—yes." But her eyes were more indulgent than her tone. They were remarkable eyes under brows that had the clear sweep of a bird's wing. They had tried in turn to be blue, green and brown; and had finally compromised in an iridescent mingling of all three. "Of course it's bitter hard lines; but that doesn't affect the right and wrong of it. And one can see your Derek is a man of character, which puzzles one the more. You know, Jacko, I'm very French in my notions about marriage. It is—for the race. Of course—one understands the temptation. She's a sweet child, if not very much more——"

And upstairs Derek found the "sweet child" propped among her pillows with a red gold plait over each shoulder; a little languid, but surprisingly acquiescent in view of her outburst the night before; and he was too grateful for the change to worry about the how or why of it.

"Are you pleased with the plan, Derry?" she asked, smiling, a wistful note in her voice.

"Well—if you're quite sure you'll be all right," he said truthfully. "I want to do whatever's best for you, little girl. You know that."

"Yes, I know that." A very small sigh escaped her. "And I'll be all right. She's just sweet to me—Miss de Vigne. She wants I should call her Gay. She says it's my best chance—keeping very quiet. I s'pose—it wasn't—you?"

"Me? Of course not!" His astonishment rang true. "D'you think I'd run away from you because you're ill? I'm not that sort."

"No! You're just the nicest sort that ever was!" She caught his hand and pressed it against her face. "And I do try an' not be a fool Lois—about things——"

"You're a very brave Lois. Miss de Vigne said so," he told her, and her eyes lightened. She dearly loved a compliment; and more than ever, after that, she loved Gabrielle de Vigne.

An hour later the two men were dismissed with Gabrielle's blessing; knapsacks on their shoulders and deep content in their hearts. Her instructions were that they should take the train to Sydney, a

delightful journey along the coast ; from there they could push on, afoot, into the wilder parts of the Island. And they were not wanted back till Saturday.

“ That’s orders, old man ! ” quoth the delighted Jack, convinced she had planned the whole thing purely for his benefit. “ No use having a mad impulse to rush back on Friday. At home we call her She-who-must-be-obeyed.”

“ When it happens to suit our convenience ! ” Gabrielle corrected him with her smile.

If indeed she was considering Jack, as well as her patient, it was Derek who, of them all, owed her the deepest debt of gratitude ; though no one had any inkling of the fact. Three days of Jack’s good company—the sheer ease of it ; the perfect freedom of mind and body ; after two weeks of honeymoon atmosphere “ to order.”

He could scarcely believe in his good fortune, even when they two were settled opposite each other in the brisk busy little train, rolling through miles of fair and open country, discussing Home telegrams that revealed a horizon dark with the threat of war. By the time they had lunched in Sydney’s one hotel, and cruised among beautiful islands and had decided which one they would annex when the great moment came, Derek shed his scepticism and basked in the sun of Jack’s unblushing triumph. Later still, when they left Sydney and plunged afoot into the wilds, the immediate past—Australia, Canada, Lois—fell away from him. For a blessed while he recaptured

the irresponsible freedom of Oxford days. All trace of languor vanished from body and brain—

Trinity College friends—and Mark Forsyth in particular—had sometimes wondered what satisfaction a man of Derek's brains and character could find in Jack Burlton's society ; and probably Derek himself could not have enlightened them. Can a man ever account for his friends ?

For him, it sufficed that the satisfaction was there. From Sydney he wrote his wife a brief letter, adding that, as they would be on the tramp, she could not hear again. That done, he mentally banished her and took with both hands the good hour given him by the gods and Gabrielle de Vigne—

In the light—and dark—of after events, those three unclouded days shone in his memory like stars that the years quench not.



## CHAPTER IX

“ Our acts our angels are, for good or ill ;  
Our fatal shadows that walk by us still.”

—SHAKSPERE.

AND at Silversands, Lois was doing some close thinking on her own account. Not for a moment did she doubt that Derek had gone at Gay's suggestion ; neither did she doubt that he had gone willingly. He had been very “ dear ” at parting ; but because he was too honest to make insincere protestations, he had taken refuge in silence and affectionate generalities—not for the first time.

During their trip, she had tried to accept his odd silences as part of his general oddness—in certain things. Now she began to suspect their true nature. He still did not care “ that way.” Perhaps he never would. That last, she well knew, depended mainly on herself. Such force as she possessed dwelt in her capacity for emotion ; her love of love. If she could not, by some means, make him care, there was little use in being his wife. And wives did—— She had read of them in novels. She was reading one now, in which the husband was Derek ; the wife, herself ;

and jealousy the key with which she unlocked his heart. Derek had said he was not much given that way: and if she could only rouse him—what a triumph! She herself was feeling distinctly jealous of Jack; and her childish plan was to turn the tables by being a shade less accessible to Derek and particularly pleasant to his friend. After all he had seldom seen her with Jos. If things went on under his eyes, it might be different; and once she felt sure of his love, it might be easier to tell him everything.

She had not wit enough to perceive that she was planning to make the whole situation ten times harder for him: so urgent was her craving for his love, for the comfortable assurance that he knew and forgave all. Not being prone to deceit, nor burdened with any real sense of having sinned, the secrecy worried her more than the fact. Once or twice she caught herself wondering—if the truth were known, would she be spurned as unladylike and worthless by Gay who, in her eyes, was a revelation second only to Derek himself. Her brief glimpse into his world, and sisterly intimacy with the kind of girl who might have been his wife, made her regard him more than ever as a prince in disguise. By the miracle of his great kindness he had married her: it remained for her to complete the miracle, like the wife in her novel, by winning his love. . .

So, in secret, she hugged her cherished scheme and wondered—would he perhaps come home sooner than he had said?

He did not come home sooner ; in fact, not till tea-time on Saturday. It had been a weary morning ; the two women immersed in newspapers, talking anxiously and rapidly in French. Some big trouble looming in Europe, she gathered. But she asked no questions. She simply withdrew into herself, dreaming her dreams. What was Europe to her or she to Europe ? Derek was coming home ; and she was going to make him love her as husbands loved wives in books.

It was disappointing that he should arrive at tea-time, when they were all together in the veranda, and she could not get away alone with him or give him the particular welcome she had planned ; but at least it would enable her to " begin on Jack." And she had been hoping that the arrival of the men would check the everlasting talk about countries that, for her, were mere names on a map ; though Gabrielle and her aunt—when they happened to talk English—spoke of them as if they were female relations. But Derek and Jack seemed to have caught the obsession in advance. They brought more papers. Their eyes had the same look of preoccupied anxiety. They talked in the same queer, personal fashion of Russia and Belgium and France ; and of Germany being " out to smash Europe "—as if Europe was a tea-set !

Derek greeted her with his friendliest smile and pressed the hand that hung nearest him. " You look awfully well," he said. " Quite a good prescription getting rid of me ! "

"It wasn't through getting rid of you," she murmured reproachfully; and Jack, who was reading out snatches from his paper, broke in: "Just what you said, Dirks. It's going to be a gamble on the great scale. War on two fronts——"

"All the better," said Derek grimly. "She signs her death warrant. But Russia will take weeks to mobilise."

"And the notion is, while she's rubbing her eyes, Germany will just march to Paris and back——"

"*Mon Dieu, non!*" Madame de Fontenac's low voice was charged with passionate protest. "In Paris again—*les sales Boches—les cochons*—never! I was there in '70. A child: but—one remembers. *Pas possible!* The good God is above; and below—there are a few French soldiers."

"Also a handful of British ones," Derek said quietly. "If our great and warlike Government permits."

"You *doubt* if England will stand by France?"

It was Gabrielle this time; her voice quiet as his own, but a gleam in her eyes made the orange flecks in them seem like sparks of fire.

"It's not England I doubt, but her present Government. I believe it will be touch and go——"

"'Go' for choice!" remarked the irrepressible Jack. "In that case I scoot back and clamour for a commission. I'm pretty well qualified——"

Suddenly he glanced at Derek's face and said no more.

To Lois their talk conveyed little or nothing; but

she refrained from worrying them with questions ; partly because she was not much interested, partly because she did not want to shame Derek by revealing her ignorance to his friends. Only one concrete fact emerged. Jack was going to "scoot back and clamour for a commission." But the connexion escaped her. A commission had something to do with a "deal." That was all she knew about it ; and her sole concern was lest Jack should scoot before he had served her secret purpose.

After tea, when she had lured Derek into the garden, she ventured a question or two. "Did Jack mean—is he going back to England because of all this—whatever it is?"

Derek frowned. "Yes, of course he'll go—if we fight."

"Who is 'we'?" she pressed him, suddenly alarmed lest Derek be implicated also.

"England—the British Empire that Germany is out to destroy."

"Oh, I see." A pause. She was as much in the dark as ever. "Would that make a lot of difference—over here?"

"A middling amount! D'you happen to realize, Lois, that you are living in the British Empire?"

She glanced at him to see if he intended a joke. "I thought I was living in Canada—B.C." she said.

"And you didn't know that the two are parts of one big thing, just as your arm is a part of your body?"

She shook her head "I'm afraid I seem—to all

of you—a proper fool. But—after father died, I didn't get—much education——”

That pathetic confession and the break in her voice moved him to put an arm round her. “Don't worry about that, dear,” he said, patting the shoulder his hand rested on. “Education isn't everything. I'll teach you things in the evening once we're settled down. We'll all need to rub up our geography if this conflagration spreads—and it's pretty sure to spread——”

But she scarcely heeded his words. His caress, his brotherly kindness, in place of the husband's greeting she craved, let loose a flood of emotion that swept away her poor little plans for conquest—

Without a shadow of warning she flung her arms round him and kissed him passionately.

“Oh, Derek, darling,” she said, leaning her whole light weight against him, “It's real good having you home again. You are just a mite glad, too—aren't you?”

Derek—taken aback and genuinely stirred by her passion—tightened his hold and let her glean what assurance she might from that. “Don't make a scene over it, dear,” he pleaded, drawing her down on to a seat screened by evergreens. “It's this kind of thing upsets you so. You're simply shaking.”

“I know. And I wouldn't need to, if——” she caught her breath and drew away a little. “Oh, Derry—can't you *see*—it ought to be you—not me——”

“Of *course* it ought,” he agreed with smothered

vehemence. "But it isn't, and it never has been—what it ought to be. That's the curse of the whole situation—for both of us. At least I've been straight with you, Lois. I've never pretended——"

"I don't *want* you to pretend!" she flung in, with flaming cheeks. "But haven't you—won't you ever——"

"Oh, my dear—why torment yourself and me by pressing the point? I'm doing my best and I'll go on doing it. Can't you leave it at that? Can't you see I'm worried to death about this big business at Home that dwarfs all our petty personal affairs——?"

He broke off there; for she suddenly sprang up and left him, with never a word or a backward look.

Half relieved and wholly puzzled, he sat watching her, till she vanished into the house. He was sincerely sorry if he had hurt her, but he could not feel sorry that for once the truth had been spoken between them. It might help to clear the air—

Then, with a great sigh, he rose and paced the far end of the lawn; to and fro, to and fro, in the hope that mechanical movement might quiet the tumult in his brain. Controlled by temperament and training, it needed a strong wind to stir his deeper emotions; but to-day, in this tremendous hour of crisis, the intensity of his love for England and for Avonleigh burned with a clear white flame that blinded him to all lesser matters, as he had tried to make Lois understand. England *must* fight . . . ! If a temporizing Government dared withhold her, the

very spirits of her great dead would rise up in protest. Yes—England would fight : and he, Derek Blount—an insignificant unit among her millions of loyal sons—must remain where he was ; chained hand and foot by his own act. It was the culminating stroke of Fate. . .

Lois, watching from her bedroom window, wondered, fruitlessly, what were the thoughts that goaded him to walk up and down, up and down. She had never seen him taken that way before, and it gave her, for the first time, a feeling of mother-tenderness towards him. She wanted to comfort him, to ease his restlessness, as he so often eased hers. She had been a fool to run away just when he was trying to tell her things ; but it hurt her so to realize that the desperate business of winning him was not even begun, that she could think of nothing else. What was wrong with her that she should not make him care ? Jack was her last hope—

He did not prove a difficult subject. Glad of a respite from the one topic, he responded to her shy advances readily enough. He even suggested a stroll in the garden after dinner ; while Derek and Gabrielle spent a strenuous evening over maps, moving imaginary armies and out-generalling the Imperial German Staff. When bedtime came, she felt she had made a promising start.

Upstairs she was eloquent in praise of Jack ; and Derek absent-mindedly agreed with her. Neither of them alluded to the scene in the garden or the threat of War.



On Sunday they all went to church except Madame de Fontenac, who attended Mass. Derek spent most of the afternoon writing to Mark, while Lois went her own way and found Jack more charming than ever. He discovered that she sang; and as he could strum a little he accompanied her by ear. During the process, Derek came in for a book, glanced at them, made a casual remark and went out again.

"I wonder if he's annoyed!" thought Lois, hopefully; and decided that to-morrow she would persuade Jack to take her out somewhere—pictures or shops. But Derek's annoyance, if it existed, was too slight to be of any account.

On Monday he seemed more absent-minded than ever; and there was a tense, strained look in his eyes. He spent most of the morning in the naval officer's study, poring over familiar volumes of history that he had last handled in his rooms at Trinity, and blessing the owner for the mental relief they afforded, even as he had blessed him for the scent of sweet peas and mignonette.

To Lois, this new Derek seemed almost a stranger. Her contact, so far, had been with his character rather than his mind. He was simply her prince disguised as a lumber jack. Now she saw him as a man of thought and books; a man more than ever removed from her untutored simplicity; and while she plied her small arts, it was she who felt the pang of jealousy, when she heard him talk to Gay and Madame de Fontenac as never to her, and could scarcely follow a word. Still she persevered in her

desperate resort ; though he hardly seemed to notice. Even when he spoke to her, his mind seemed half astray ; and the failure of her passionate outburst withheld her from repeating that form of appeal. She sighed and concluded ruefully that it was all this horrid war. A world cataclysm had crushed her poor little plan. It was as if a traction engine had passed over a butterfly.

Gay, who had been so affectionate, was changed also. She too seemed able to think and talk of nothing but this vague and terrible event which, for Lois, had no meaning at all. And by Monday even Jack was less attentive, 'more withdrawn into himself.

German troops in Belgium and in France ; and still no decisive word from England——!

They began to be aware that Madame de Fontenac thought a good deal more than her French politeness would allow her to say : and they chafed under the justice of these unspoken criticisms. The acute anxiety endured by all right-thinking British men and women, during the four days of August 1914, was the measure of their deep distrust of an Administration which had led them blindfold to the crater's edge.

But Jack, however anxious, was always well mannered. Also, he saw Derek was taking things hard ; and, on the whole, he found Lois and her serene ignorance a relief. They spent most of Monday together. In the afternoon, at her suggestion, he took her for a drive ; and later they went to see a touring company in "The Merry Widow."

Lois thoroughly enjoyed herself ; and on her return she saw the first sign of a change in Derek's manner. He said nothing, however ; and she could hardly sleep for hoping and wondering whether he would speak in the morning—

He did speak in the morning. He had risen early, but came in again while she was dressing.

" Look here, Lois," he said, " if you want to go anywhere to-day, I'll take you myself."

His tone was quite friendly ; but she could not leave well alone.

" Why ? " she ventured, adjusting a tortoise-shell comb. " D'you mind me going around with Jack ? "

" Not within reason. D'you prefer it ? " The question raised her hopes and she played up to it accordingly.

" Well, he's fun and he's real kind. Things aren't mighty cheerful just now. And—I thought you'd like us to be friends."

" Of course. But I can't have you playing the fool with him . . . the way you do. It gives a wrong impression—and it's not fair on Jack."

Those five words took the wind clean out of her sails. He was simply thinking of Jack ! In her bitter disappointment, she felt almost angry with him.

" Guess he's old enough to look after himself," she retorted with a toss of her head. " And *you* haven't a word or a smile these days——"

" If it's my fault—I'm sorry," he said with

disarming gentleness. "Don't be later than you can help."

When he had gone, she burst into tears—and was glaringly late in consequence. But no one seemed to mind.

The paper had arrived. Derek was reading out the telegrams. Even Lois could feel a tingle of excitement in the air.

"*That* about settles it—thank God!" Derek remarked when he had finished reading.

"Hope we go in with both feet," said Jack. "No mere naval demonstration."

"Not likely—if we get Kitchener."

"And we don't, any of us, understand, in the minutest degree, what it all *means*," Gay murmured, thoughtfully stirring her tea. "I wonder—how long——?"

"Years and years," said Derek, "if it isn't a walk over."

She shivered. "*Anything* rather than that!"

After breakfast, the air being clearer, Lois begged Derek to explain so that she could understand: and he explained to the best of his power. A good deal still passed over her head; but she pounced on one concrete fact.

"Jack said he must go home at once. Has *he* got to fight?"

"Sure thing—when he's been trained. Agar, too, if he has any grit, will go—and scores and hundreds of others: thousands, I hope, in good time. The British Army's the straightest goods—what there

is of it. But there isn't over much: and if we're to knock spots out of Germany, we'll need every available man in the Empire."

A pause. She had pounced on another concrete fact. "Derry—are *you* an available man?"

"No—I'm not." He set his teeth lest "worse luck" slip out in spite of him.

"Are you—wishing it?" she ventured very low.

"Wishing's neither here nor there," he said briskly. "Don't worry your head about that, little girl. Bad luck you can't keep Jacko. You'll have to put up with me!"

To his intense relief she merely murmured, "Don't want Jacko"; gave his arm a convulsive squeeze, and said no more.

Jack himself broached the subject on the veranda after dinner. The thing had to be gone through; and Derek was glad to get it over. It came after Jack had unfolded his own plans in a quiet business-like voice, assumed out of consideration for Derek, who could make none. But at the last his natural self prevailed.

"Oh, Dirks, old man," he broke out desperately after a portentous silence, "it's the very deuce leaving you stuck out here. If we could only go into this together! Think of it!"

Derek frowned and looked straight before him into the gathering dusk. "Thanks—I'd rather not. Fate doesn't square things that way. I can't leave Lois—so that's that."

Jack considered Derek's unpromising profile for a

moment. Then he remarked tentatively: "Shoals of married men will join——"

"Not with wives in her precarious state of health and no responsible belongings."

"But, Derek, she's an awfully sweet person. Couldn't you bring her home?"

"And leave her—with *whom*?" Derek could not keep the bitter note out of his voice. "She *is*—a sweet person. But picture her—with mother—Ina—Van?"

"But—if they don't know you're married, they'll be expecting you to turn up."

"I shall write to Father, of course." A pause; then he added gruffly: "Drop it, Jacko. Freeze on to your own affairs. Won't your sister go with you?"

"No. She can't come yet because of her aunt. But the minute she's free she'll be off—Red Cross in France, I gather. Somehow I never seemed to realize her Frenchness very much till just lately.—You stop on anyway till I'm off, Dirks; and we'll go along together as far as the Fates allow."

To that last Derek assented willingly enough.

Four days later they left Victoria—an oasis of peace and pleasantness never to be forgotten: and travelled together till the parting of the ways.

Then it was "Good-bye, old man. Good luck"; the vigorous waving of Jack's hat as the Canadian Pacific whirled him east; and Derek, heavy at heart, yet outwardly cheerful enough, set his face towards Nealston.

## CHAPTER X

“ Life is at her grindstone set,  
That she may give us edging keen,  
String us for battle ; till, as play,  
The common strokes of fortune shower.”

—MEREDITH.

THREE weeks later, he and Lois sat at supper together in the veranda of their own home. It was a still, oppressive evening, the last of August ; and in Nealston there was nothing to distinguish this particular day from any other of that heroic and terrible first month of war.

Yet away, on the other side of the world, in an apple orchard near Néry, a certain British battery was carrying on a certain preposterous duel—three guns against twelve—that will live for ever in the annals of history and romance. On this day, too, the Channel ports lay open and defenceless, awaiting the influx of German hordes—that never came.

The shadow of that dark month was on Derek's heart and in his eyes. He had almost grown to hate the superb serenity of lake and mountain that so mockingly contrasted with his inner vision of battered, pursued, undaunted flesh and blood. Only a miracle could now save Paris ; and Derek foolishly

supposed the age of miracles was past. His faith in things not seen—so far as it had survived the shocks of early doubt—was too nebulous to uphold him in this hour of awful uncertainty. Nor was he sustained by the optimists' innate conviction that the worst can never happen. He knew very well that the worst could happen. It might be happening even now; while he, in another hemisphere, was savouring the salmi of his talented Chinese cook. One had frankly to face the appalling fact; and, in the teeth of things, hang on somehow. It was not a pleasant process: but where faith falters, there is the greater need of courage; and courage, like wisdom, is justified of her children.

As for Lois, though partially enlightened, she could not, in the nature of her, realise the half of what he was suffering in his dumb, lonely fashion. Unperceptive by nature, she was further blinded, at the moment, by the fulfilment of her twin desires—a man and a house of her own. The little house was her new toy. Every detail interested her: and she insisted that he should be interested too. More—he was called upon to make up her mind for her about every domestic item, from the pattern of a curtain to the shape of a vase. In his free hours he must take her to “movies”—the more glaringly melodramatic the better—or follow her endlessly from shop to shop. He was infinitely patient with her futile vagaries; and she, by way of reward, idealised him in the very manner he could least endure. Distracted with anxiety, there was neither



peace nor refreshment for him within the four walls of his home—

The place itself was pretty and pleasant enough, set well above the town that climbed the skirts of the mountain ; its houses rising tier beyond tier, like the seats of an amphitheatre. He owed the discovery mainly to Mrs. Macrae. She was also responsible for their " help " ; a motherly widow woman, without whose ministrations there would have been little of comfort or tidiness in the house—and Derek appreciated both. The cook had been his own find ; and he was not above admitting that the man's skill helped, considerably, to oil the wheels of things.

On reaching Nealston Hotel, they had found a note from Mrs. Macrae begging them to pay her a visit before settling down. In a casual postscript she added that Jos had gone East, with several others, to the big camp that was already springing up at Valcartier. More men were leaving soon. They would welcome extra help ; and Derek was glad enough to be of use. It had surprised him to find how he relished the return to regular, outdoor work ; how it soothed and relieved the strain on his mind.

At Beulah Ranch he had written that difficult letter to his father, which told very little, yet implied much to any one who really knew him. He stated, simply and plainly, that tragic and unusual events, outside his control, had landed him in a marriage which he could not expect any of them to approve, perhaps not even to condone ; since the extenuating circumstances were not altogether his own to reveal.

He had done his best to give a favourable impression of Lois ; had dwelt upon her youth, her precarious state, and his own conviction that, as matters stood, he could not leave her while she had need of him.

“ I think,” he had concluded, “ that you will understand—though I express myself vilely—how I hate having to give you such news at a time like this and how badly it hurts not being able to go straight home to join Kitchener’s Army. I’ve tried to write to Mother about it, but have only succeeded in half filling the waste-paper basket. She would never come within miles of understanding. But if you think she ought to know—and Van—will you please tell them whatever you think fit. One will be misjudged on all sides—that’s the curse of it. But so long as I stand square with you, I can put up with the rest. Make a few allowances—if you know how—for your ‘ faithful failure,’ who hardly deserves the honour to be your loving son,

“ DEREK BLOUNT.

“ P.S. My apologies to Aunt Marion. I wrote the truth at the time. Hadn’t a notion how soon it would be otherwise.”

It had been an unspeakable relief to get that letter off his mind ; he could not expect an answer for weeks ; and even while he craved it, he dreaded the sting of sarcasm that his seeming folly could scarcely fail to evoke.

Meantime he would have been well content to remain on the Ranch. But Lois, the bride, with her pretty clothes and rather languid airs, seemed more

than ever out of place there. The heat upset her—and the mosquitoes, after respite from their tyranny. She had been frankly bored and begged Derek to be quick about finding a house. And he had been aware of a change in Mrs. Macrae. Though kind as ever, she was less outspoken; and Derek often felt her watching them both, in a way that recalled that long-ago evening, when he would have laughed in the face of any lunatic who had prophesied his marriage with Lois Aymes. He had never told her the facts, and her one letter to him had clearly shown that she did not quite know what to make of it all; but only of urgent necessity would he broach the subject. She must think what she pleased. To be misjudged on all sides seemed his portion.

As for his fellow workers—who were going East as a matter of course—what must they think of him, a British subject and a gentleman, ignoring the call to arms; content to waste his manhood on Macrae's apples and plums. They must either dub him a shirker, or a bridegroom too much married to face the wrench of leaving his wife: and he hardly knew which libel he resented most. Better, after all, a fresh job, where he could straightway make it clear that his wife's ill-health would only permit him to work half time. To Mrs. Macrae he had said frankly: "I hate quitting when the boss needs hands. But I can't explain my private affairs to every man who looks askance at me, though it makes me mad. Besides—Lois wants a home"

And Mrs. Macrae had given him candour for candour.

"Mighty hard on you, old son. I'd keep her here for you, and willing; but she's not fit. You're right. It's a decent home she needs in her state—and yourself. She's fair gone on you. Guess you're the slap-up model husband, Derry."

"Don't *you* get calling me names," he had answered gruffly.

Her laughter had cleared the air. She had promised to "buzz round" Nealston for him: and the bungalow on the hillside had been the outcome of her buzzing.

It had been strenuous work settling Lois in, but her childish delight in it all was his reward. With the hopefulness of her kind, she lived from day to day: while Derek's more imaginative brain was haunted by the ghostly, inexorable shadow that mocked at her content. For himself, meanwhile, mere use and wont eased the sense of enchainment that still irked him badly at times. Between companionship Lois and working on another fruit ranch, he had little leisure to call his own; and he grew genuinely fond of her—up to a point. He might even have grown fonder still, but that under her sensuous softness and sweetness he found a vacuum; and the trail of the third-rate fiction she devoured was over all her thoughts and ways.

The veranda where they sat at supper, on this August evening, was furnished like a room. It was

smothered in clematis and ramblers, and it framed incomparable views up the higher reaches of the Lake. Lois, in a clinging blue tea-gown and a flowered scarf, completed a domestic picture charming enough to satisfy any man whose mind was not racked with the craving to be elsewhere.

Her movements were more listless these days. Of late she had been fretful and irritable, which was unlike her ; and broken nights had laid dark smudges under her eyes. And her trouble was not purely physical. She was beginning to worry about Derek. The steady exodus of young men, from the ranches and the town, impressed her more than any telegrams in the paper : and now there crept into her heart a little gnawing fear that perhaps Derek really was "available." That fear had been urging her to speak out and beg him to go, if he wanted to—if he ought.

She was just screwing up her courage, when he rose abruptly and went over to the end of the veranda. It was a boy with a cablegram. Derek tore it open and stood silent so long that she grew nervous.

"Derek, what is it?" she asked. "Bad news?"

"Not exactly!" he said with his whimsical smile. "From my father. Family affairs."

Instead of tearing it up, he thoughtfully refolded and pocketed the flimsy slip of paper.

It contained nine words: "Yours received. Deeply deplore circumstances, but approve your decision.—AVONLEIGH."

The idea that his father might cable had never

occurred to him : and the act implied a measure of understanding, where he had expected none. It also made the task of hanging on to his job a shade less difficult.

Within a week there came a rift in the war cloud, and his doubting spirit stood rebuked. The miracle had happened. Paris had been saved. In the midst of his incredible relief, he remembered Gabrielle and Madame de Fontenac, whose faith was founded on a rock. He wondered if they were still at Silversands. Miss de Vigne had written affectionately to Lois soon after they left. Since then, they had heard no more. But later on, came news of Jack, who had got his cavalry commission, and a long screed from Mark ; —“ in it,” of course, up to the eyes. Mark sporting a kilt ! If he could only be there to see ! But it was quite on the cards that he might never see either of them alive again. . . .

The bewildering news of Mark's engagement troubled him profoundly. Like every one else, he had taken Sheila for granted—one of the few girls he heartily admired. Yet Mark—judging from his letter—was pretty badly smitten. He wondered, sometimes—had that faculty been quite left out of his own composition ? Any average man, he supposed, would by this time have fallen in love with Lois. And he rated himself for a cold-blooded beast.

As a matter of fact the war, with its vast and appalling possibilities, was absorbing all his capacity

for emotion. England—though he criticized her and never talked patriotism—was dearer to him, as yet, than any woman. And England was fighting for her life. Derek had no illusions on that score.

By this time, scarcely a man of his year at Trinity but had secured a commission or joined the ranks. Even "Blinkers"—the mild, unwarlike poet—was kicking his heels in barracks; hugely bored, but sustained by the conviction that England had need of him, and rhapsodising to that effect in laboriously "unfettered" verse. Derek could not rhapsodise, but he could serve. He was of those for whom work is prayer; and a perverse Fate condemned him to idleness while his logging companions and the lucky devils at home were, at least, doing what they could to stiffen England's sword arm. Only his innate sense of proportion steadied him, as always, in the day of trouble. England, it reminded him, could hold her own without his microscopic assistance. Still—it takes the individual to make the mass, the atom to make the sphere: and this atom could not but chafe at its exclusion from the field of honour. He chafed still more when the thrill of pursuit was definitely checked, when Antwerp fell and the Ypres salient was born. A pencilled scrawl from the trenches told him that Mark was in the thick of things; and Jack was either going or had already gone. . . .

And in the bungalow on the hill Lois coughed more persistently, idolised him increasingly, saw him grow

restless again and watched the shadow of those terrible August<sup>17</sup> days creep back into his eyes. He was kindness itself to her. He would take her, when fit, to the pictures or for trips on the Lake. He read her decent literature in the evenings; and only grew restive when she too clingingly adored him. But all the while she knew that his mind and heart were miles away—in England or on the blood-drenched battlefields of Flanders. She hated to feel she was holding him back; yet she could not bear to let him go. Again and again she tried—tactlessly, unskilfully—to say what she felt, to discover what he really thought about it; and always he laughed it off or changed the subject.

But there came a day when, in spite of him, she fatally insisted on pressing the point.

It was in the evening. Too cold for the veranda now; and she lay in her long chair near a glowing stove. Derek sat beside her with a book. He did not know she was watching him; and he remained unnaturally still for a long time, without turning a page. She saw that his spirit had slipped away from her. Only the shell of him sat there in her pretty drawing-room, because the shell of him was obliged to stay and take care of her. Was he pining to go—hating her because she held him? Last time, when she talked of being a mill-stone, he had got quite cross; but to-night she felt keyed up even to telling him he must not stay if he felt it was wrong.

“Derek,” she asked suddenly, “what *are* you thinking about so hard?”



He started and looked round at her.

"The one eternal subject," he said truthfully.  
 "What else?"

"Don't you ever—these times—think of me?"

His smile reproached her forgivable folly. "Why of course I do, little girl. You *are* a proper goose!"

She sighed. "I'm worse than a goose. I'm, a millstone——"

"Nonsense! A featherweight like you——!"

But to-night she was inexorable. "Not a mite of use joking it off, Derry. It's *true*. And there's times—when you sit so quiet—all lost . . . I can't help but wonder are you ever wishing—I wasn't here?"

That impermissible question fairly took his breath away. "My dear child—you're the limit! Nice sort of husband you make me out. You ought to know me better by now——"

"Oh, Derry, I do—in some things. But all the time I can feel that horrid war tugging you away from me. If there wasn't me . . . you'd be off to-morrow—wouldn't you?"

The tragedy of it, and the tactless futility of her persistence, smote him silent. She was tormenting herself and him to no purpose—not for the first time, either.

"There—you *see*!" Her plaintive voice trailed on, taking his silence for assent. "And if you really did ought to go, it makes *me* get wishing—almost—I wasn't here——"

At that he leaned forward, took her gently by the shoulders and looked so straight into her eyes that the blood surged up to the very hollows of her temples.

“ My dearest little girl—if you weren’t ill, I’d slang you without mercy. As it is—please understand, once for all, that *you’re* my job, first and foremost : and if I’m not quarrelling with the fact, there’s no call for you to make fancy difficulties. So don’t let me hear you talk like *that* again——”

“ But, Derry——”

“ Oh, let *be*, for God’s sake.—Does a woman never know when to stop ? ” But she looked so fragile, as the flush ebbed from her face, that he added in a changed voice : “ Now—kiss and be a good little wife ; and I’ll carry you to bed.”

Without a word she lifted her face and they kissed mutually. Then he carried her to bed—

“ Just as well, after all, she should out with it, if it bothered her,” he reflected later on, over his book, “ but I hope to goodness I’ve heard the last of it.”

Hesat late that night, as often, poring over military history or trying his hand at articles on the problems that thronged his brain. It helped to right the perspective of things—

Next day she was subdued; but smiling ; a little withdrawn into herself. And on the Wednesday—returning from work later than usual—he found an empty house. Good Mrs. O’Rane’s round face was as long as a fiddle.

“What’s the matter? Where’s Mrs. Blunt?” he asked sharply; and she flung up her hands.

“The dear knows. Ye’d scarce bin gone an hour when she wint out o’ that door, an’ niver a sight of her since—the saints preserve her!”

Derek had a strange sensation as if his heart slowly rose up and turned over within him; but his face gave no sign.

“Did she say where she was going?” he asked, in a voice so contained that his “help” ejaculated mentally, “The stony-hearted they are—these English!”

Aloud she said: “‘Just a thrifle of shopping an’ a walk,’ says she. Her that’s bought all a woman can be wanting an’ more, not to mention she had a bit of a tempershaw——”

Derek had turned on his heel and was leaving the house; but she called after him on a high note of lamentation: “Dear, oh, dear, sir, there’s chops and taties just spoiling for you.”

“Eat them yourself,” he flung back. But she would not have it, and sooner than argue he bolted the food without tasting it. Then he set out on his desperate errand with even less of a clue to guide him than on that strange, unforgettable night of June——

Wild possibilities lurked at the back of his brain; but he clung to common sense, till all likely coverts had been beaten without avail; her favourite shops, the houses of her few friends. Then fear came upon

him, and he rang up Beulah Ranch. No news of her there; and though Mrs. Macrae spoke hopefully, her tone belied her words.

"Shall I come over to you by the evening boat?" she concluded. "Or will I be in the way? No palaver. Say Yes, if you mean 'Yes.'"

"Rather not. You'd be the greatest blessing in life. That's the truth if it's quite convenient."

"Sure thing. I'll just settle the kiddies and come right along. Send Kitts down to the landing and I'll ride up."

"Thanks. That's you all over. I must be off now and report to the police. So long."

The head of the local police force was a large and very human person; and his business-like inquiries were tinged with discreet sympathy. Derek's controlled manner cloaked an increasing anxiety tempered by a lurking sense of unreality. That he should be describing Lois to this kindly stranger, as if she were a lost parcel, seemed like some horrid, crazy dream. Yet he listened gravely and gratefully to assurances that searchers would be sent out in all likely directions and they would ring him up the moment they had anything to report.

After that there was nothing more to be done; but, goaded by desperation and sheer restlessness, he tramped the road above the Lake for a distance far beyond his wife's powers of walking. Then he sat down on a rock—and wild possibilities rushed in and mocked him. Was it possible——? Had her disappearance any connexion with the pitiful stuff she

had talked two nights ago? She was so unaccountable. It was quite on the cards—

Her remark to Mrs. O'Rane did not wash. In either case she would have waited to go with him. At one moment he felt almost angry with her: and the next, his heart contracted at thought of her alone and frightened, or hurt. For months he had so tenderly guarded her that she seldom went out by herself: and now—goodness knew what folly her cheap instinct for the theatrical might have prompted her to attempt! Was ever woman born at once so aggravating and so irresistibly pathetic? If a second edition existed, he had no wish to encounter it.

He felt oppressed by a feeling of helplessness very foreign to him: and he thanked heaven for the great heart and sound head of Mrs. Macrae.

It was late when he reached home, tired and worried, to find that a cable had arrived in his absence. He tore it open hurriedly and read: "Mark wounded and missing. Feared killed. Taking car Belgium. Will report result.—MACNAIR."

Twice over he scanned the hateful message; then he sat very still, taking it all in. . . .

Dearly though he loved Jack, Mark was the true comrade of his mind and spirit; without him, the salt of life would lose half its savour. He was so vividly, commandingly alive that Derek could not believe in his extinction. But even so—there were endless awful possibilities. . . .

Into the midst of these came Wei Sing's gentle

reminder that the soup was getting cold. Then he roused himself and remembered Lois—also Mrs. Macrae, who ought to be here by now. The sound of hoofs reassured him, and as he stepped into the veranda she came riding up the path—a queer, semi-masculine figure in her dungaree divided skirt and felt hat. Like most of her kind, she rode astride and could vault into a saddle or out of it as easily as a man. But to-day there was no ready word of greeting, no light of humour in her brick-red face and blue eyes.

“There you are, thank God!” was Derek’s greeting; and while he unstrapped her bundle, she sprang to the ground.

“No news?” she asked. He shook his head. “Only this—from home. Things never come singly—my best friend.” He handed her the telegram; and when she looked up there were tears in her eyes. “Poor Derry! My poor boy——”

Derek said nothing. He could not trust himself. But he loved her at that moment, as he loved Lady Forsyth; and for the same quality. Unmothered as he was, the mother-need was strong in him still. Some men, no matter how self-reliant, never lose it altogether.

At dinner they talked only of Lois. Things began to look serious and Mrs. Macrae did not conceal her anxiety.

“Had she bin worried any?” was her first question, and Derek explained, adding that he believed he had dispelled all that. But Mrs. Macrae looked

doubtful, she had not much opinion of a man's skill in dispelling feminine fancies. "Women in her *state* get queer notions—do queer things," she said with a significant look; and seemed on the verge of some confidential remark; but evidently thought better of it.

After a silence, during which they made a show of eating, Derek said suddenly: "What about—dragging the lake near the shore?"

Mrs. Macrae looked startled. "Guess Lois wouldn't get thinking of that."

But Derek knew she had thought of it once; and might do so again. He only doubted her courage to carry it through.

After dinner they rang up the police—without result. Then they paced the veranda, guessing, speculating, talking in jerks; till Mrs. Macrae, in her wisdom, insisted that he should go to bed.

"What's the damn use? D'you suppose I can sleep?" he asked half angrily, and her smile approved his wrath.

"You can lie flat anyways," she said gently, "and try to hold your mind on a book. There's times Nature will take her own way, no matter what's up inside. Reckon you've been rampaging around all day; and it may be the same to-morrow. So where's the sense of getting tucked up an' wastin' shoe leather half the night? It won't do a mite of good. That's horse sense, Derry, an' you know it. So you get flat an' give yourself a chance."

Sooner than argue, he obeyed. Anxiety is exhausting ; and to anxiety was added the strain of conflicting sensations that he was doing his loyal best to ignore. But Nature would not take the chance he gave her. Even Joseph Conrad's inimitable tale, " Lord Jim "—one of the rare novels he could read and re-read—failed to hold his attention, or to stifle the insistent whisper—" Can't it be the end——? "

" Not now—not this way," was the honest hope of his heart. When her moment came, he must be with her, if only to ease her fears. Strange how she haunted him—her listless movements and plaintive voice and the red-gold glory of her hair. They had not been four months married ; and their brief union had been in no sense intimate ; but because she had loved truly, up to her lights, the impress she left upon his heart was genuine if not deep. Now—lost and strayed—she was no longer the wife who so often worried him, but the frightened child, whose pitiful appeal it was not in him to resist. Whatever might be the fantastic reason for her flight, lack of love had no part in it. She was small. She was futile. Even her capacity for love was mainly a blend of passion and sentiment ; but it was not altogether base metal—in his own case at least. She had lately given proof of that. It was, he began to realise, the one lever that might conceivably lift her above herself. It might even give her the courage she had once lacked—

In his heart he prayed it had done no such thing.



But where on earth was he to look for her now——?

Towards morning Nature had her way at last ; and he fell sound asleep.

No news at the police office next day ; and Mrs. Macrae was obliged, reluctantly, to return home—if only for the moment.

“ What’ll you do now ? ” she asked at parting.

“ Go on hunting till I drop,” he answered doggedly ; and went back to the house to think things out.

There on the table, a telegraphic envelope lay awaiting him. As he snatched it up, all the sensations of yesterday surged through him :—and when he opened it anti-climax was complete.

It came from an hotel in Victoria, and it ran : “ I was going right off to give you a chance, but Gay has left here, so no use. I am ill. Please come. So sorry.—LOIS.” In the confusion of his mixed emotions, relief predominated—relief tinged with vexation : but vexation was shamed at thought of all she had risked in her genuine, if futile, attempt to clear the way for him. So like Lois—not even to find out if they were there. And he himself had never once thought of the railway station ! He would not have given her credit for so bold a stroke. But now, at all events, there was something definite to be done.

## CHAPTER XI

“ For she loved much . . . ”— ST. LUKE vii. 4 . .

HE found her almost in a state of collapse. She wept and clung to him and implored his forgiveness ; and he, remembering the thought of his heart, kissed her with a fervour that surprised and uplifted her. Then he scolded her sternly for her own good. The scolding passed clean over her head ; but the treasured memory of that kiss, given when she least deserved it, atoned for all she had been through. She was ill, unquestionably ; scarcely fit to travel. The return journey was an ordeal Derek would not soon forget : and only by a miracle did he get her home in time.

For more than a week she hung between life and death. For more than a week life itself was a mere appendage to illness—and all the paraphernalia of illness : doctor and nurses and hushed footsteps and Lois talking fitfully in a voice that was not her own. Once he heard her talking of Jos, whose existence he had almost forgotten in the stress of recent events.

And while invisible forces wrestled for possession

of her fragile body, he worked full time at the Ranch. At home he knew himself useless, simply in the way—because he was a man. Yet when Mrs. Macrae came over, she instantly had her status in the sick-room scheme of things—because she was a woman.

Derek himself had need of regular, strenuous work to ease his distraction of mind. He felt, in a measure, responsible for Lois' sufferings and it hurt him keenly. There was also the ache of anxiety about Mark: and, deep down, the subconscious knowledge that her death would mean freedom to spend himself for England, his greater love. The news of Mark had set him longing more than ever to get back to his own country, his own kind, and take his legitimate share of it all. Yet the fright about Lois, the meeting at Victoria and the glimpses he now had of her, so stirred and deepened his genuine feeling for her that, with all his heart, he hoped Fate would not exact the full payment for her loving, foolish impulse of sacrifice.

And as that strange hushed week drew to an end, it began to look as if her strength—what remained of it—would weather the storm.

The doctor had spoken more hopefully that morning; and in the evening, when Derek returned, the day-nurse—just off duty—told him that the patient had fallen into a deep natural sleep. If that sleep lasted—all might yet be well. Mrs. Macrae was in the sick-room. She would come and see him later on.

Derek thanked her formally and passed into his

little book-filled study where he found mail letters : Jack, Mark—he would not have believed the sight of Mark's writing could ever give him pain—and the long-delayed letter from his father.

He tore it open hastily, prepared for the worst.

Lord Avonleigh wrote : " My dearest Boy,—It was lucky I wired, as my promised letter was held up by a bout of fever and a touch of inflammation. Nothing to make a long tale about. I would not let Aunt Marion worry you needlessly. Your present position must be quite sufficiently distracting. I hope the wire eased your mind somewhat. That was the idea. But I frankly confess that your news was a staggering shock to us both. A mere scrape of the average variety would have been less disquieting. But on reflection I have the grace to be glad it is otherwise. The complication, though serious enough, is not to your discredit—at least it does not sound so from the little you have thought fit to tell me. I was glad you mentioned her age. It puts a good many disagreeable suppositions out of court. Do you remember a remark you made the afternoon of our talk about this—that you would try not to make an unholy muddle of things ? Alas—you seem to have succeeded pretty thoroughly, for the time being ! I venture to hope that the girl is attractive. It may ease things for you.

" You are right about mother. If explanatory facts were piled as high as Nelson's column, she would neither understand nor condone such a flagrant departure from the normal. I am telling her and

Van that you are keen to join the Army, but you are unfortunately tied up and will be coming home the moment you are free. I gather Van is also keen—and also tied up. It is a pity. I would like one of you, if not both, to be doing your duty in that line, and I felt quite sure of you——” (“Didn’t he feel sure of Van?” Derek reflected, not a little taken aback.) “Your misfortune could not have come at a more cruel moment, but we both feel you are doing right in the sad circumstances. And you have our united sympathy though it is tempered with disapproval! Write again soon. Marion ties me down to a short letter, so I’ll keep clear of the war, which is going to be a bigger business than most of them think. God bless you. Take care of yourself. Your loving father.—AVONLEIGH.”

The whole tone of the letter was kinder, more understanding than he had dared to hope for; and the different ending—he very well knew—was no mere formula. He seemed only to be discovering his father now that half the world lay between them. Why had they missed each other so hopelessly all through the years of his boyhood? Partly, he supposed, because both parents had made an idol of Van; partly because he himself had vainly idolised his mother: and in pursuing the shadow had lost the substance of a possible friendship with his father. If they could but meet and talk over all this, Derek had a feeling they might achieve it yet. Some day—perhaps——?

He started. It was Mrs. Macrae at the door.

"Derry—can I come 'long in?"

"Yes, of course." He rose and proffered his chair. She accepted it and looked up at him where he stood near the stove, holding his hands over the warmth.

"I'm tired, some," she sighed—and then smiled. "A good sign that.. No time to feel tired till you know you're through the wood."

"Is Lois—through the wood?" Derek asked quietly.

She nodded. "I reckon so. Sleeping like a babe new born."

"Thank God for that."

"So pretty she looks. You did ought to see her."

"May I—when?"

"Presently. Quiet as a mouse!"

He let out a deep breath and was silent, warming his hands. Twice she gave him a significant look. Then she ventured to speak her thought.

"Say, Derry—I s'pose you know there was more to it than her lungs?"

His mute bewildered gaze assured her he knew nothing of the sort. "And didn't Lois know it neither?" she demanded of his silence.

He looked uncomfortable. "I—really—she never said so. . . ."

"My! You *are* a sweet pair of innocents! Well—there's an end to it now. An' better so, may be." Again she paused and looked up at him, thinking what a fine manly face he had and how tired he

looked ; wondering did he guess, at all, about Jos Agar ? It was she who ought to have seen earlier how things were going ; and she blamed herself more than Lois—or even Jos. For she knew, now, what the nurses—thank Heaven—could not know, that Jos was responsible for all they had just been through. If Derek did not know, he ought to be told ; and she found the telling unexpectedly difficult. Plain spoken though she was, she had her reticences. And she was fond of Derek ; fonder than ever, these days. He was so plainly a gentleman all through ; she could not bear to shock or hurt his finer feelings.

Presumably he agreed with her last remark ; but he said nothing. In respect of confidences or intimate talk, one had to go all the way with Derek Blount.

“ Say, Derry,” she plunged at last. “ Did you never get thinking how far things might have gone between her an’ Jos Agar ? ”

“ Agar ? ” He frowned sharply and she saw the question startled him.

“ That was my meaning when I said—better so. And—she never let on ? ”

He shook his head. “ Probably she was afraid—poor darling ! The cowardly brute ! I’ve found her straight in other ways.”

“ And you didn’t never suspect ? ” she pressed him, the ice being broken.

“ N-no. Well——” he corrected himself, “ fact is . . . I did think about it—before . . . in the spring.

I wondered you weren't more careful with her. But—since we married, I haven't given it a thought."

It was her turn to be surprised now. "You wondered about it—*before*? And yet—you married her! Though it's plain to see, you aren't gone on her—never have been!"

Derek winced. "*Is* it so plain?" he asked, evading the point.

"'Tis to me anyways; though I thought different—once. When you might have had her, you held off; and when thar was good excuse for any man letting her go, you nipped in an' married her. I never *could* make head nor tail of it."

"And—you never will," he said very quietly. "It's our own affair. I'd rather not talk of it, if you don't mind.—Have you said anything to Lois?"

"Sakes no! She's bin in no state for talk."

"Well, if she doesn't realize things—let her be. If I'm not worrying, I won't have *her* worrying on my account. She's done too much of that already."

Again Mrs. Macrae looked at him steadily, pondering . . .

Then: "I knew right away you was the straight goods, Derek," she said with her large smile. "But I never reckoned you was as straight an' simple hearted as that amounts to. Guess she's bin in luck, has Lois——"

"Oh, dry up, please," he said, in a pained voice. "I've done what I could for her—which was little



enough. And now—she's half killed herself for my benefit."

Mrs. Macrae nodded and rose from her chair. "You've acted like a man and you can bet she knew it. She's pulled through her trouble; but I reckon it's not very much more you'll be able to do for her, after this. I must be getting back, case she might wake. You look in later."

When she had gone Derek sat down and opened Mark's letter. . . .

He had scarcely finished reading it when Mrs. Macrae was back at the door. This time she entered without ceremony: her news in her startled eyes.

"Derek—she's gone—as quiet, as quiet. Just slipped away in her sleep while we were talking."

Derek said nothing: but the dazed look of pain in his eyes went to her motherly heart.

"Will you come, my dear? No fear we'll disturb her now. After all—so best, poor lamb!"

He had not thought her strong voice could achieve so soft a tone. It vibrated through him, almost upsetting his control. But he rose and followed her without a word. On the threshold she glanced at his face that was set and strained; then she slipped away and left them alone.

Lois lay like a child asleep, one cheek resting on the pillow, one thick red-gold plait over her shoulder; her still face delicately tinted like a waxen transparency. It seemed to him incredible that she would never wake again. And the irony that had tinged

their whole brief relation, persisted even to the end. For Lois, dead, stirred him, moved him more profoundly than Lois alive had ever done, for all her clinging devotion.

His own words came back to him : " She's half killed herself for my benefit." They fell short of the truth. This one thing, in her short aimless life, she had done thoroughly : and it was done for him. But that he knew she had simply forestalled the inevitable, he could scarcely have endured the thought.

Suddenly, while he stood there, her voice sounded clearly somewhere in his brain : " Kiss my eyes to sleep, Derry." Stooping, he kissed them each in turn that her last sleep might be unaffrighted with dreams. His own eyes were heavy with tears ; and one of them fell on her forehead. Very gently he wiped it away. Then he laid his hand upon her bright hair ; held it there a moment in a silent benediction—and went out—

Mrs. Macrae stayed with him till everything was over ; and he was thankful exceedingly for her presence to ease his very real sense of loss and emptiness. For all her blunt, outspoken ways, her touch never jarred ; and she mothered him, in his dazed and silent distress, as his own mother had never done in all her days.

For nearly four months, his life had moved in a restricted circle with Lois for its central point : her health, her fancies, her insistent need of him.

Only now that she was gone, did he realise how complete that concentration had been; and the readjustment of heart and brain took time. He begged Mrs. Macrae to do whatever she pleased with the furniture and all the pretty useless trifles in which Lois had taken such delight. The mere sight of them hurt him more than he could have believed. And he spoke more than once of their last serious talk together; of his fear that something he had done or left undone had been responsible for everything.

"I did my level best," he assured Mrs. Macrae, "to convince her that it was all right—that she needn't worry. But we men are such clumsy creatures——"

And Mrs. Macrae, in return, did her level best to ease his mind on the subject.

Their brief sojourn together, in the valley of the shadow, was an experience neither would easily forget; and in the course of it, their latent friendship became an abiding reality.

Gradually, completely, Derek's whole nature righted itself. Old allegiances claimed him. He was his own man again—

Early in December came news from Lady Forsyth that Mark had been restored to them—wounded and broken, but alive: and it needed only that to awaken him altogether. Straightway he cabled to his father: "Free to join up. Propose returning by Japan and Bombay if you approve." And very soon the answer

sped back to him: "Delighted to see you.—  
AVONLEIGH."

A week later, he stood, at last, on the deck of an ocean liner watching, with very mixed emotions, the ghostly glory of Mount Baker gleam and grow misty and fade into nothingness, like the vision of a dream.

*Parkstone,*  
*May 1917—May 1918.*

END OF BOOK THREE

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The present volume—although it completes the opening phases of Derek Blount's story—is really the first half of one big book, which paper scarcity and control have obliged the Publisher to issue in form of two closely consecutive books. The second one will appear as early in 1919 as circumstances permit, and will be entitled "The Strong Hours."

If, in certain respects, this volume suggests a sense of incompleteness, I would ask my readers to remember that the two books were one in conception and execution; and were only divided on account of present exigencies, to which novelists, like the rest of the world, must cheerfully submit.

M. D.



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